ACADEMICS GOING PUBLIC

HOW TO WRITE AND SPEAK BEYOND ACADEME

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This book was a pleasure to edit as the authors were a joy to work with and their work was fresh and personal. Having personal narratives was important to me as I think that the way to convince others to speak out is through examples.

I'm grateful to each of the authors in this book as they took time out of their busy schedules to write their chapters. Their unique perspectives and expertise offer much to readers. I am also indebted to the staff at the Penn Center for Minority Serving Institutions, a place that I call home, for their support throughout the past two years as I pulled this book together. The individuals at the Center are the most beautiful, sincere, open, intelligent people I have ever worked with and they give me hope that academe can be a place that allows one to bring one's whole self to our work.

I'm thankful for those scholars that taught me to be brave in academe. Asa Hilliard, my mentor until he passed away, cautioned me to be authentic and sincere in my approach to research. John Thelin role modeled writing for multiple audiences and taught me how to communicate history in engaging ways. Susan Fuhrman taught me to face my fears even when I wanted to turn the other way. And Michael Nettles showed me how to take risks even when I was nervous about failing.

I am inspired by my daughter, Chloe, who has a beautiful openness to all and a charming sense of confidence that I rarely see in children, especially young women.

I hope that you will enjoy this book, learn from it, and perhaps start to speak out to larger audiences. I have been disheartened in recent years by the fear that I see in the eyes of tenured professors, who have such immense privilege, yet stand silent in the face of injustice. I hope that you will choose to stand up and speak out.

1

INTRODUCTION

Marybeth Gasman

In an essay titled *The American Scholar*, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1837)[1] noted that books and scholarly writing should not bind intellectuals. A scholar's most important work is that of action. Emerson called those who are not pushed to action cowards and doubted whether one can bring their whole self to scholarly work without engaging in action.[2] Emerson's is just one perspective as the role of the intellectual has been debated for centuries and will continue to be debated; criticism and rigorous intellectual exchange are essential principles in the academy. Most of those academics writing in this area see public intellectuals as always having a university home from which they gain their credibility. And, still others writing about the topic see only a few academics rising to the level of public intellectual – viewing the role as only suited for rare intellectuals.[3]

This last pronouncement seems to be steeped in an era of traditional media outlets (e.g., magazines, public museum and library talks, scholarly books for general audiences). However, with growing technology and new media, the role of the intellectual is changing ever more quickly on the evolving higher education landscape than it has in the past. Whereas faculty members could once *choose* to operate in an ivory tower – hold up in their offices – they are hard pressed to continue operating in this manner in the 21st century. Over the past 20 years all sorts of new and competing media and intellectual outlets have surfaced including TED Talks, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and blogging to name just a few. The general public consumes information from all of these venues. However, many faculty members have not kept up with these new media and sources of information. Some have ignored these venues, thinking that they do not matter or that they are a mere blip, rather than here to stay or evolve. Others have lambasted these new venues, shaming scholars that choose to use them or scaring young scholars into thinking their career prospects will be doomed by their activism.

The Importance of this Book

As the editor of this book, I want to make clear that I am advocating that higher education scholars take their work to the public. Our research is important and the only way to remain relevant and to put our work to use is to share it with diverse and many audiences. Attending academic conferences and writing for peer-reviewed journals is essential in order to maintain the academic rigor of our work. However, holding fast to these outlets *only* is misguided, naïve, and neglects to understand the social justice issue that higher education is in America and beyond. To have the option of not speaking out and being activist with one's research in our current higher education landscape is a point of privilege and from my perspective is a move against social justice.

As faculty, we should be providing more and more venues and opportunities for our Ph.D. students to learn how to use their voices in public ways in conjunction with their research rather than merely teaching them how to give a 12 minute research talk at an academic conference. Through our classes, our mentoring, and our role modeling, we can provide reasonable and disciplined ways to speak out, stand up, and use our research to make meaningful change across society. If we aren't speaking out, someone else will and my fear is that the "someone else" will be uninformed and won't know enough about higher education – especially the social justice needed to bring about equity in society.

Of note, rather than calling for everyone to be a "public intellectual" in the traditional sense, this book is urging faculty within the field of higher education to engage the public more fully. This book argues that faculty members need to engage traditional media, new media, policymakers, funders, and the general public in order to have a voice on salient higher education issues. The chapters and chapter authors also discuss the best approaches for this engagement, offering concrete strategies and examples for diverse audiences.

It is important to be clear that most well-known public intellectuals have been men, and often, White men.[4] Social media and other new forms of media have the potential to be more inclusive and elevate the voices of a more diverse group of faculty members. The chapters in this book are authored by a rich diversity of individuals, providing unique perspectives.

Overview of Chapters

This practical, "how to" book is organized into eight succinct chapters that are short in length, and a concluding chapter. The authors focus on the various ways that faculty members, especially, but not limited to those in the field of education, can reach out to the general public, media, policymakers, funders, and beyond. Each chapter includes practical steps – or "how to" instructions to assist readers in "going public" with their research. Each chapter also draws on the personal experiences of the author, humanizing the work ahead.

In Chapter Two – "Professors and the Press" – reporter Scott Jaschik offers an insider's perspective on talking with reporters. For more than 25 years, Jaschik has covered higher education, working first at *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and now, at *Inside Higher Ed*. At these publications, he operated in the ambiguous area

between journalism and higher education. Both of these publications are independent journalistic entities, staffed by reporters who for the most part are not Ph.D.s and who operate primarily as journalists. However, these publications have an audience of researchers and practitioners within higher education and policymakers and funders interested in higher education. Jaschik writes for an audience that is often deeply familiar with the topic and possesses intellect far beyond the average American. Yet it is clear to Jaschik that professors and the press often misunderstand one another – missing opportunities for both parties. In this chapter, he delves deeply into the relationship between professors and the press, explaining the nuances of their interactions. Specifically, he addresses: Why professors should care about the way their research and higher education are portrayed in the mainstream press. What do professors need to understand about today's press landscape? Jaschik also offers advice for professors on how to increase their media profile or respond to reporters' inquiries without sacrificing the integrity of their research.

In Chapter Three – "Writing Opinion Articles" – Don Heller, the provost at the University of San Francisco and a prolific writer, provides guidance for academics interested in writing opinion articles in a variety of media outlets. Commonly called "commentaries," or "op-eds," these articles provide an important venue for sharing research findings through concise and straightforward ideas that help to inform public debate about salient issues of the day. Heller presents detailed instructions on how to write opinion pieces for general publications and those in the field of education; he also discusses his thought processes on some of his own work. His perspectives provide both inspiration and concrete ways to challenge readers and have a wide-reaching impact on the field.

In Chapter Four – "The Art and Science of Sharing BIG IDEAS in Academic Public Speaking" – the Ohio State University professor Terrell L. Strayhorn urges academics to engage new approaches to public speaking – more engaging methods. From his perspective, thrilling stage presence, spontaneous audience engagement, and creative expressions like spoken word are the order of the new day. And while the historic and new image of intellectuals and their methods couldn't be more different, one point of timeless

connection is the academic speaker's commitment to sharing information from their research findings. In this chapter, Strayhorn details his approach to public speaking and why he thinks that traditional approaches do not have the same impact as newer, more captivating approaches. Using his own experiences and growth over time, Strayhorn provides strategies for those familiar and unfamiliar with public speaking on a national scale.

Chapter Five – "Using Social Media to Promote Scholarship: Amplify, Magnify, Clarify" – showcases the perspective of Richard J. Reddick, a professor at the University of Texas. In his words, "a social media presence is a 21st century literacy, much like having access to traditional media was in the late 20th century." Reddick argues that scholars are on the periphery of this phenomenon. The purpose of his chapter is to provide insight regarding how academics can use social media to draw attention to their scholarly contributions, highlight when one's research is shared in traditional media, and contribute to robust conversations on topics of note. Or, more succinctly and in a Twitter-friendly 140 characters or less, Reddick shows readers how to amplify, magnify, and clarify scholarship via social media.

In Chapter Six, "Crafting an Online Scholarly Identity: Invention and Representation," Dafina-Lazarus (D-L) Stewart discusses jockeying with identity while using social media to craft an image and drawing people to that image. According to D-L, being a scholar is not automatically assumed by one's academic degree, nor does an academic degree restrict one's role. Becoming a scholar is often a process of invention and reinvention. Crafting an online scholarly identity is an important topic for those considering venturing into online platforms. In this chapter, D-L, based on familiarity with enacting a scholarly identity in both face-to-face and online platforms, discusses five areas that should be explored by those wishing to craft an online scholarly identity. These areas include one's personal mission, false modesty, intentionality, platforms for expression, and followers of one's work. D-L weighs the pros and cons of creating an online scholarly identity and answers questions for novices and those already engaged alike.

Chapter Seven – "Social Media Use for Survey Distribution" – authored by Shonteria L. Johnson, Noah D. Drezner, Jason C.

Garvey, and Michael Bumbry, is focused on weaving social media use into your work in order to reach more people and to amplify the impact of your work. Most social media subscribers primarily use social media platforms to connect with existing friends and reconnect with older associates. In this chapter, Johnson and colleagues discuss social media as a researcher tool for survey design. They provide an overview of the general uses of social media in survey distribution and establish the importance of using social media when surveying people across historically marginalized identity groups. Finally, they provide a case study using their work, reviewing the process, outcomes, and lessons learned from social media use in distributing *The National LGBT Alumni Survey*. Johnson and colleagues argue that the mere presence of research on social media elevates the research topic and provides a venue for research that is often swept under the rug.

In Chapter Eight, "How to Write an Influential Press Release," Kat Stein, a higher education public relations expert asks academics, "Do you want your scholarship to have an impact? How do you get the word out about your work? How do you break through and get a reporter's attention for coverage?" She argues that one powerful communications tool that enables academics to bring attention to their work and their interests is a press release. Unfortunately, Stein notes that hundreds upon thousands of press releases go unnoticed and unread daily. That said, she provides detailed instructions and inspiration for writing compelling press releases. Stein focuses on two important questions that academics need to answer: Whom do I want to reach? How do I reach them? She then provides the answers.

Chapter Nine – "Handling Hecklers, Controversy, and Backlash" – is written by me (your editor) and explores the underbelly of operating in the public sphere. When one ventures into the public domain, there are risks and some of them are ugly. Academe can be mean from time to time but the larger public sphere includes people from across the spectrum with a lot of time to critique and hurl insults. If an academic steps into the public domain, it is important to understand that one's ideas and thoughts and sometimes very person will be critiqued and not always with respect. I regularly write opinion pieces and talk to the media about issues

of race. As a result, I often take controversial stances on issues and sometimes feel the wrath of those who disagree with my ideas and perspectives. In this chapter, I offer advice to faculty members who do research on controversial areas and want to speak out, including how to manage hecklers, scathing commentary, and controversial issues.

The book ends with concluding thoughts on both the institutional and individual benefits of "going public." I hope that the book gives you much to think about and encourages you to think about sharing your work more widely. I also hope it urges you to move outside of the ivory tower into the public domain. Yes, peer review and rigorous research are essential to our credibility in the academy. However, speaking to ourselves, hiding behind academic conference speak and jargon and remaining silent as researchers in education when education is a justice issue moves us away from the reasons why we all came to the field and the moral imperative that I hope we all embrace for the sake of our children and our students.

Notes

1 Kenneth Sacks, *Understanding Emerson: "The American Scholar" and His Struggle For Self-Reliance*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003.

2 Alan Lightman, "The Role of the Public Intellectual," MIT Communications Forum (2014). Accessed at http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/papers/lightman.html on December 18, 2015.

3 Mark Greif, "What's Wrong with Public Intellectuals?" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 13, 2015. Accessed at http://chronicle.com/article/Whats-Wrong-With-Public/189921 on December 18, 2015.

4 Patricia Hill Collins, *On Intellectual Activism*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2012.

3

WRITING OPINION ARTICLES

Donald E. Heller

The media landscape has exploded in the Internet age, providing many more outlets far beyond the traditional – or now often referred to as "mainstream" – media that were the only choices a generation ago. While less than two decades ago scholars who wished to share the results of their research with the general public had a relatively small number of newspapers, magazines, and broadcast media – including television and radio – in which to publish, the Internet has greatly expanded the options available. While these additional options provide new opportunities, they also present challenges as well.

The role of scholars as "public intellectuals" has been much in vogue in recent years, yet there is no commonly accepted definition of exactly what a public intellectual is, or what one must do to be a public intellectual. The "intellectual" part of the label is fairly easy

to parse; the Merriam-Webster online dictionary describes it as, "of or relating to the ability to think in a logical way; involving serious study and thought; of a person: smart and enjoying serious study and thought."[1]

Most of us who are scholars believe that we think logically, and that we are capable of and enjoy engaging in serious study and thought. The "public" part of the title is more difficult to describe clearly and concisely. As academics, most of us are used to communicating with colleagues in our own fields, with occasional forays into neighboring arenas. This communication typically happens in scholarly journals, books (depending upon the discipline), and at research conferences. For those of us who work in professional fields, such as education, we often engage with practitioners as well as other scholars.

For most academics, however, it is less common to bring our scholarly work to the attention of the broader public. Many worry that their work is too complicated or technical for a layperson to understand. Others worry that the typical reward structures for faculty members in universities – which tend to emphasize productivity in research, teaching prowess, and engagement with professional and scholarly organizations – do not provide incentives for communicating with the public. Thus, academics often feel pressured to focus their energy on more traditional scholarly communication, and less on interactions with the general populace.

The role of communicating scholarly research to the public is often described as "public scholarship." One research center that promotes public scholarship defines it this way: "Public scholarship promotes mutually-beneficial partnerships between higher education and organizations in the public and private sectors and provides pathways for scholars to share their academic work with broader public audiences."[2]

In this chapter I provide guidance for academics interested in writing opinion articles in a variety of media. Whether one sets out consciously to become a public intellectual by engaging the broader public on a continuing basis through mass or targeted media, or chooses to only dabble in it with occasional forays, one common pathway is through writing opinion articles. Commonly

called "viewpoints," "commentaries," or "op-eds" (from opposite the editorial page, the location where newspapers traditionally have placed non-staff written opinion columns), these articles provide an important mechanism for translating research findings into concise, easy-to-understand ideas that help to inform public debate about important issues of the day. At the close of the chapter I provide some examples from my own work.

Choosing an Outlet

There are two primary considerations an author should take into account when choosing an outlet for an opinion article. First and foremost is understanding who the audience is for the publication you are considering. Some print newspapers, magazines, and websites serve a national audience (or even international, in some cases), and thus may be interested in any topics that are prominent on the national agenda. Print newspapers on this list would include *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and to a lesser extent, newspapers in major cities around the country such as the *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune* and *Chicago Sun-Times*, and *Washington Post* and *Washington Times*. Print magazines in this category would include *Time*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *National Review*, and *The Nation*. Website-only publications include Huffington Post and Salon.[3]

Other media, such as many daily newspapers and magazines, are more regionally focused and will be interested in articles that address local or regional issues of concern. Daily newspapers in most cities, for example, have a limited news hole for national or international news, and focus instead on stories that serve the needs of the local or state communities. An opinion article will mostly generate interest from these publications if it addresses a relevant local issue.

The second consideration is what topics the outlet covers. Many, such as the daily newspapers and news magazines mentioned above, focus on current news across a broad range of subjects, and thus are generally only interested in a topic that is considered timely. Others focus on specific topics, so that your proposal would have

to fit into that domain. For example, as its name implies, *Science* magazine, the flagship publication of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, focuses primarily on physical and life sciences, but it does branch out on occasion into economics, education, and sociology.[4]

In the field of education, major newspapers include *Education Week* (focusing primarily on K-12) and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (covering postsecondary), and magazines such as *Education Next*, *Change*, and *THE Journal*. *Politico* covers politics in depth, with a primary focus on Washington and the federal government, while *The Weekly Standard* and *The American Prospect* also cover national politics (and on occasion world events), but from what is generally acknowledged to be a conservative and liberal viewpoint, respectively.

There are numerous examples of publication across many fields, but the important thing is to have a good understanding of the focus and audience for the publication. If the opinion article you are proposing to write does not address the audience for a particular publication, it will not be interested. In addition, you want to know something about the reputation of the publication or website. Is it generally recognized as being objective, or is it known for having a particularly political or social viewpoint? Publishing in media that are generally recognized as overly partisan or slanted can tar you with that same label if you are not cautious in how you approach your relationship.

A question that often arises is whether outlets provide compensation for writing opinion columns. Policies vary across different media, but in general, most do not pay for your work unless they solicit it from you. The best practice is to inquire about compensation when you are submitting your work, or when a newspaper, magazine, or website contacts you, so there is no misunderstanding.

Choosing a Topic

Just as the three most important words in real estate are location, location, and location, the three most important words in writing opinion articles are relevance, relevance, and relevance. The topic you are considering for a commentary article has to be relevant to the publication or website you are considering, and in turn, relevant to its readers. While you may think a topic is important, timely, or engaging, it must pass the relevancy test for the outlet to which you are submitting it. An article on a topic that is not relevant to the publication will be quickly discarded or ignored. One guide for scientists interested in communicating to the broader public described it this way:

> these two little words – "so what" – are what our audience is asking. Why should I care about what you are saying? Or as Cory Dean of *The New York Times* often asks, "Why are you telling me this?" If you begin by thinking about *their* values, expectations, and interests, you can translate your information in a way that resonates instead of just dousing them with what's on your mind.[5]

As described earlier, you have two broad choices for outlets: general interest publications, those that cover a broad range of topics, and special interest ones, those that focus on a specific subject. While your initial inclination may be to focus on a general interest publication, thinking that it will publish on any subject, you need to keep in mind that your topic needs to be of interest to a broad swath of readers. An article that is so narrow such that it would gain the attention of only a small sliver of readers is unlikely to be successfully placed in a general interest publication. Conversely, if you are thinking about a special interest outlet, you have to make sure that your topic is sophisticated enough for its audience.

In choosing a topic, you also want to have a sense of how much the topic has already been covered in the opinion pages. A column on an issue that has already received a great deal of attention is not as likely to be accepted for publication, particularly if it closely mirrors a piece that has already run. A number of years ago I wrote an op-ed advocating a particular educational policy, and submitted it to a daily newspaper for which I thought the topic would be particularly relevant. It was rejected, without any comment, and I reacted with my usual disappointment. It was not until a few weeks later that I discovered that the same newspaper had run a column describing a very similar proposal only a month before I submitted my piece.

Timing is another consideration, and is an important one that an outlet will consider when deciding how relevant your piece will be to its audience. Most scholars are used to writing against very flexible deadlines; typically, though with some exceptions, the work itself dictates how long the writing takes, rather than being constrained by an externally imposed deadline. Writing opinion articles, especially when focused on issues tied to the current news cycle, often requires scholars to move quickly in order to get a piece to a news outlet on a timely basis. While some topics may transcend the news cycle, and be welcomed at any time, most opinion articles comment on current events and need to be submitted on a timely basis.

One strategy to ensure that opinion articles are tightly tied into the news cycle is to anticipate news events ahead of time. This does not require a crystal ball, but instead necessitates being aware of upcoming events in the scholar's area of expertise that are likely to be covered in the media. Media outlets like to run advance opinion articles that help set up an upcoming event, or alternatively, op-ed pieces that are released in parallel with breaking news stories.

An example of this kind of event is the release of a major report, either by researchers, think tanks, or government agencies. Very often the release date of the report is known well in advance, providing the researcher with the opportunity to craft an opinion article in anticipation of the release. While it is not always known what the report will say, the op-ed can provide broader context for the topic covered in the report.

Another example of when an event can be anticipated is when legislation or regulatory action is pending by state governments or the federal government. An opinion article that outlines the likely impact of a bill under consideration or a set of regulations being developed will most likely attract the interest of the media if it is submitted on a timely basis – either while the legislation is under consideration or concurrent with the bill's passage or release of the regulations. If you wait until the legislation has been signed into law, or the regulations have been put into place, and then take some time to craft a viewpoint article and submit it to a media outlet, it is likely you will have missed the news window. While some events have a longer shelf life, and may attract ongoing debate and conversation

in the media, it is better to have something prepared and ready to go, rather than being reactive.

Still another opportunity for matching your piece to a specific timing is to tie it to the anniversary of a major historical event or a holiday. Media outlets will often run opinion articles that reflect on these historical occasions.

Scholars are most persuasive, and are most likely to find a receptive audience, when they are writing on a subject that is in their area of expertise. Our positions as professors, along with our training and scholarly experience, lends an imprimatur of credibility as an expert on a topic, as long as that topic is directly related to our scholarly work. Media outlets will be most receptive to topics on which a scholar has demonstrated proficiency.

Another important and related consideration is that, in general, academics' free speech rights are strongest when speaking on their own areas of research and teaching. Over the years, courts have ruled that faculty free speech rights – particularly for those working in public institutions – are not absolute, and these same courts have been most protective of the academic freedom of faculty members when speaking or writing on matters related to their teaching and research. As Michael A. Olivas puts it,

> professors have wide-ranging discretion to undertake their research and to formulate teaching methods in their classroom and laboratories. However, this autonomy is, within broad limits, highly contingent upon traditional norms of peer review, codes of ethical behavior, and institutional standards . . . In short, academic freedom does not give and never has given *carte blanche* to professors but rather vests faculty with establishing and enforcing standards of behavior to be reasonably and appropriately applied . . . [6]

As with many legal issues, the case law is not entirely settled on this issue. Over the last decade, some courts have moved in the direction of recognizing that faculty members have no greater protection when speaking out on matters of public concern *outside* their own area of expertise than do employees of other public agencies. But other court rulings have affirmed a broader definition of the free speech rights of faculty members.[7]

Constructing the Article

Opinion articles are unlike most forms of scholarly writing in a number of ways. First, and perhaps most important, is the length. While scholarly publications, such as journal articles, book chapters, and technical reports typically run on for pages, op-ed pieces need to be very short and to the point. A rule of thumb is that daily newspaper op-eds should run approximately 600–800 words, or roughly two double-spaced pages. Articles in special-focus publications, magazines, or on the web may be afforded more space, but typically no more than 1,200–1,500 words.

Second, the most effective opinion articles will follow a format similar to what many of us were taught in grade school when we first learned to write an expository or persuasive essay:

1. Tell the reader what you are going to say.
2. Say it.
3. Summarize what you said.

The variation in the first step when writing a viewpoint article is to establish for the reader the relevance and context of the topic on which you are writing. Why should the reader care about this issue? What is its relevance to society broadly, or to the audience for which you are writing? Why is it an important issue now? Given the space constraints I outlined above, this task needs to be performed exceedingly concisely, generally in no more than a paragraph. If you cannot grab the reader's attention in the opening of the article, you are unlikely to encourage her to read the rest of it.

The bulk of the piece should contain your argument, or the opinion(s) with which you are trying to sway the reader. The emphasis here is on "opinion;" you are not simply providing the facts about a particular issue, or summarizing what other people believe about it, but instead you are striving to sway the reader with your viewpoint. You will be most effective if you write in a manner that is direct and to the point. As one guide put it, "Opinion editors look for articles that are provocative and succinctly argue particular points of view on issues that are dominating the headlines. They do not want pieces that argue all sides of an issue."[8] You should avoid the often-used adage in academic writing, "On the one hand . . . on the other."

As I described earlier, faculty who write opinion articles are most persuasive when they are writing on their subject of expertise. In doing so, you should strive to tie your arguments to the research that you (or others) have conducted on the topic, rather than writing from a perspective that appears to be drawn solely from your own opinions. Thus, you want to avoid phrases such as:

- "In my opinion . . ."
- "I think . . ."
- "Many people believe . . ."

and instead start your arguments with phrases like:

- "The research shows . . ."
- "A landmark study conducted by . . ."
- "Data demonstrate that . . ."

This ability to proclaim from the perspective of solid research is what distinguishes a viewpoint written by an academic expert on the issue from one composed by most other people, and this should be the foundation of your argument. The goal is not to provide a literature review on the topic; given the space constraints, it is impossible to summarize all of the relevant research. But concisely summarizing what a couple of important studies say on a topic will help strengthen your arguments.

Some scholars struggle with taking an advocacy position on an issue, and rightfully so. A hallmark of academic scholarship is that of being an objective researcher, and many of us shy away from taking positions that will be perceived as crossing the line from objective researcher to partisan advocate. Yet the two positions are not necessarily incompatible. One can be a forceful advocate for a position, while still maintaining your position as an objective respected scholar. Perhaps Nancy Baron wrote the best articulation of this balancing act in her guide for scientists on communicating with the public:

> Scientists agonize over issues related to advocacy: what is acceptable for scientists to do and what is not? Yet scientists aren't afraid of an open debate among their peers. It's the norm at conferences and seminars, or when reviewing and reacting to papers. Yet scientists cringe at the prospect of presenting what they know to the public or policymakers – for fear of being labeled an advocate . . . Pam Matson, dean of the School of Earth Sciences at Stanford and director of the Leopold Leadership program, believes, "We all need to be advocates for the *use* of science in decision making – and that's an easy place to be." Scientists, she says, must talk about their research in a way that's accessible to people who make public policy decisions. "If we start there, we are all advocates. But we are advocating for science – for the use of science and for the understanding of science. Then there is a broad spectrum from there."[9]

The same perspective holds true for other fields beyond science, as well.

Finally, at the end of the piece, summarize in no more than a brief paragraph or two what you already told the readers: Why this issue is important, and the viewpoint of which you are trying to persuade them. Reinforcing this at the end will help ensure that you leave the readers with the correct message.

A third consideration is your choice of language. It is critical that you avoid jargon and technical language at all costs, and frame your arguments in prose that is accessible to most readers at a basic level.[10] This is especially true when writing for general interest publications. Daily newspapers in the United States typically use language that is equivalent to a high school reading level, and many even below that standard. The normal mode of scholarly writing that most of us who hold doctoral degrees engage in is often mistargeted when used in opinion articles. Jill Lepore, an example of a faculty member who spans the gap between scholarly work and general non-fiction writing in her roles as a history professor at Harvard University and a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, said it most eloquently when she described most academic writing as, "a great, heaping mountain of exquisite knowledge surrounded by a vast moat of dreadful prose."[11]

Finding a Publisher

Once you have your topic, the next step is to find someone interested in publishing it. I described earlier what you should consider in choosing a media outlet, and once you have selected the one(s) you are interested in, you need to contact them. Most print newspapers and magazines have websites, and if they publish opinion articles, they generally have instructions for how to submit them along with guidelines for submission. Most request submission via email or a form on their website.

In addition to a cold submission, you can also try to reach out to an individual who works on the editorial page of the outlet. This will often ensure that your piece will receive more direct attention than a blind submission via email or web form. Many websites, or their print version of the publication if one exists, will list an editorial page manager or other staff. Often these individuals will be willing to give you feedback on a particular topic, and let you know if they would be interested in running an op-ed on that subject.

You can reach out to your university's news or public affairs office for assistance as well. Many times the staff there will have contact information for and connections with – particularly for local media – different outlets. They can also provide editorial guidance and suggestions for where the best place would be to submit your viewpoint article.

Just as with scholarly journal articles, most publishers of opinion pieces insist on exclusivity, i.e., they will only consider your piece if it has not yet been published elsewhere. Some will reprint articles that have been published in other outlets, but this tends to be the exception rather than the rule. So when deciding where to submit an article, choose wisely as you will have to wait for an answer from that outlet before you can submit elsewhere. The good news is that most news publications have a relatively quick turn-around period, typically no more than a few days to a week, in which they will consider your submission. But until you receive an answer from that outlet, you will need to sit tight and wait before submitting elsewhere.

My best advice for those submitting op-eds is, if at first you don't succeed, try, try again. It is not unusual to submit the same article

two, three, or even more times in order to find someone willing to publish it. While you may believe that your ideas are incredibly insightful, timely, and persuasive, do not get discouraged if not every publication agrees with you. Rejections will be frequent, and when in response to a unsolicited submission, most often without any reasons behind the rejection. Keep in mind that the greater the prestige of the outlet, the lower the odds of having an op-ed piece accepted there. Many scholars dream of having their opinion article published in the Sunday Review section of *The New York Times* – and most of us will be disappointed to learn that submission after submission is rejected by it.

Examples

In this section, I describe a few representative opinion pieces I wrote, how they came about, and how I approached them. The goal is to provide some guidance, through real-life examples, of the process behind crafting opinion articles.

The first example is an op-ed I wrote in 2009 in response to the decision of the Regents of the University of California to increase student fees by 32 percent in one year, an unprecedented rise for a public university.[12] This decision, made largely in response to a cut in the state's appropriation to the university, received great publicity, much of it negative, across the state. The issue of tuition price increases, and their impact on college access, was one that I was heavily engaged in researching at the time of the Regents' decision, and I had been following the situation in California closely.

My position on the Regents' decision was counter to much of the public sentiment at the time. Many University of California students and faculty, and published media, were critical of the decision because of the argument that the increased fees would hinder access to the university by students from low- and moderate-income families. Based on the research I and others had done, however, I felt that the Regents' decision to raise fees would in the long run be better for the university and its students than the alternative, which would have been to accept the appropriation cuts from the state without raising fees and react by restricting enrollment in the university.

I knew that my position, counter to much of the public sentiment, would likely be welcomed in the media in California. Many outlets like to run pieces that are controversial, and run against the prevailing wisdom, because they know it will attract readers (either to the print edition and/or to the website). Because the University of California has campuses across the entire state, I felt that the piece could attract the attention of a number of newspapers. I quickly drafted the opinion article (approximately 775 words), and submitted it to *The Los Angeles Times*, the largest newspaper in the state and home to a number of the university's campuses. After the week-long waiting period, I received no response, so I then resubmitted it to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, another large newspaper in the state and one that is close by the university's flagship campus in Berkeley. Within a day I received a positive response from the newspaper, and it ran the piece in the following Sunday's edition.[13]

The second example is a case where a newspaper solicited the op-ed piece from me. In July 2012, former Federal Bureau of Investigation director Louis Freeh was set to issue his investigative report on the child abuse scandal involving former Pennsylvania State University football coach Jerry Sandusky. Until approximately six months earlier, I had worked at Penn State, and knew some of the individuals involved in the investigation. I had written a number of op-eds for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* over the years, and a representative of that publication's editorial team contacted me two days before the scheduled release of the Freeh report, asking me if I would be willing to write a commentary article responding to the findings in the report. They knew that I had worked with people at the university, and also knew that I had left the university shortly after the Sandusky scandal broke, so they believed that I would be in a somewhat unique position to be able to speak more openly about the report as compared with people who still worked at the university. The catch was that they asked me if I would be able to get them my article within 24 hours of the release of the report, as they wanted a quick response piece to be able to publish on their website immediately, and reprinted in the next week's print edition of the newspaper.

I somewhat reluctantly agreed to the assignment, largely because I knew the report was going to be lengthy and it would be a challenge to read all of it and write a cogent response in such a short period of time. But I felt that it was an important enough issue that it was worth the effort to take on the assignment, so I agreed. I cleared my calendar for the day the report would be released, two days later, so I would have time to read the report, digest it, and be able to write a thoughtful commentary on it.

When the 267 page report was released, I printed out a copy, and quickly began reading the text. The information in the report was disturbing, and I read through the entire body (105 pages of the report were appendices, which I skimmed). After reading it, and giving some thought to how I wanted to frame my comments, I wrote a 1,400 word op-ed, which was highly critical of Penn State's leadership.[14] I submitted it to the *Chronicle* editor that same day, it was edited and returned to me for review within a couple of hours, and was up on the website before the end of the day.

This was an example where the timeliness of the op-ed was critical to the publisher; it wanted to have the commentary up on the website the same day the report was released. The challenge for me was that I had to be able to clear my calendar and do nothing but focus on this for the entire day, a challenge given what was my usual hectic schedule. I also was concerned that I would have so little time to reflect on the report and its findings, but did the best I could in the short timeframe. I was careful to write in the piece that the report was not the final word on the allegations against the principals involved; at the time of its release, of the four members of the Penn State community who had been those primarily accused of wrongdoing, only Jerry Sandusky had already been brought to trial and convicted of any charges. I framed my comments by stating near the opening,

> I tried to keep in mind that the report is not a product of the criminal-justice system, in which those accused of crimes are given the opportunity to respond and mount a defense. Nonetheless, it includes a good deal of documentary evidence, much of it in the form of contemporaneous emails and meeting notes written by senior leaders of the university. And that evidence paints a very distressing picture of a failure of leadership.[15]

The third example is one where I reached out to a publication to ascertain its interest in running a commentary on a particular topic. In 2011 the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ), a Washington-based think tank, began developing a rating system for teacher preparation programs. It began the process by soliciting information from the over 1,000 university-based teacher preparation schools and programs around the country. Many complied with the request, though some refused, largely because of uncertainty over how NCTQ was going to use the data. My college was one that chose to comply with its request.

In 2013, NCTQ issued the first version of its teacher preparation program ratings. Many education schools, including ours, found numerous problems with the methodology used to create the ratings.[16] Because of these problems, we decided not to participate when NCTQ announced it would be collecting more data for its second round of ratings, to be released a year later.

Two of my colleagues at Michigan State who worked in teacher preparation and I decided we wanted to communicate more broadly our decision and the reasons behind it. We decided that a good venue for sharing this information would be *Education Week*, a weekly newspaper read both by education faculty as well as practitioners in the field. We felt it was important to reach both of these audiences, so we contacted a member of its editorial page staff and inquired regarding their interest in the topic. She immediately responded, indicating they were interested, and within a week we drafted a 1,200 word op-ed and submitted it to her. The column ran online in December 2013 and in the print edition of the newspaper that same week.[17]

The guidelines I have presented here are just that – guidelines. They do not represent the only way of approaching the writing of opinion articles. I am sure there are countervailing examples for many of the suggestions and illustrations I have presented here. But my experience, and that of others I have worked with, demonstrates that these will help you in promoting your own public scholarship.

Public scholarship of the type I have described here can be a distraction from the typical scholarly work in which academics have to engage if they are going to continue along the path toward promotion, tenure, and further development of their career.

The writing of op-eds can often require faculty members to move at a pace with which they are unfamiliar, which can be uncomfortable to some. They also require writing in a manner with which we are not comfortable. But they can also be very rewarding, and provide an opportunity to engage with the broader public, as well as have your work seen by many more people than is typical for a journal article or academic book chapter. And more importantly, it can provide an opportunity for your research and views to inform the public debate around issues that are of great importance to society.

Quick Tips List

1. Choose an outlet: Decide what type of publication or website would be most responsive to your piece. Determine whether you want to reach the general public, or a more tailored audience.
2. Choose a topic: Pick a subject on which you have scholarly expertise and knowledge, and will be of interest to the audience for which you are writing.
3. Write the article: Establish the importance of the topic for the reader, construct your arguments making reference to what the research says, and then summarize your arguments in the conclusion.
4. Find a publisher: Consider the timeliness, relevance, and potential audience for your topic.

Notes

1 Merriam-Webster Inc. (2014). "Intellectual." Accessed at http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intellectual on October 12, 2014.

2 Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities, University of Washington (2014). Public scholarship. Accessed at http://simpsoncenter.org/programs/initiatives/public-scholarship on October 23, 2014.

3 Most major print publications have websites as well. Many of these websites will include articles that are in the print edition, as well as web-exclusive

material. Wherever possible, I have tried to use examples that are known to publish opinion pieces from external contributors.

4 *Science* magazine (2014). Collections. Accessed at http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/collection on October 3, 2014.

5 Nancy Baron. *Escape from the Ivory Tower: A Guide to Making our Science Matter*. Washington DC: Island Press, 2010, p. 106.

6 Michael A. Olivas. *Suing Alma Mater: Higher Education and the Courts*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013, p. 17.

7 See Thomas Sullivan and Lawrence White (2013) for a recap of these recent cases. Thomas Sullivan and Lawrence White, "For Faculty Free speech, the Tide is Turning," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 30, 2013. Accessed at http://chronicle.com/article/For-Faculty-Free-Speech-the/141951 on October 29, 2014.

8 DePaul University "Writing Successful Op-eds and Letters to the Editor." Accessed at http://newsroom.depaul.edu/facultyresources/OPEDTips/index.html on October 14, 2014.

9 Nancy Baron. *Escape from the Ivory Tower: A Guide to Making our Science Matter*. Washington DC: Island Press, 2010, pp. 18–19.

10 The lone exception to this rule is if you are writing opinion articles for scholarly or similar publications, the audience of which is primarily other academics. In these cases using language that is more technical and geared at subject-area experts is acceptable.

11 Jill Lepore, "The New Economy of Letters," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. September 3, 2013. Accessed at http://chronicle.com/article/The-New-Economy-of-Letters/141291 on October 29, 2014.

12 "Fees" is what the University of California calls, for resident students, what most other higher education institutions refer to as "tuition."

13 Donald E. Heller, "UC Offsetting Fee Increases with Increased Aid," *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 20, 2009, pp. D–4. Accessed at http://www.sfgate.com/education/article/UC-offsetting-fee-increases-with-increased-aid-3278119.php on November 3, 2014.

14 Donald E. Heller. "For Penn State's Leaders, an Indictment of Malfeasance," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 20, 2012. Accessed at http://chronicle.com/article/For-Penn-States-Leaders-an/132849 on November 3, 2014.

15 Donald E. Heller. "For Penn State's Leaders, an Indictment of Malfeasance," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 20, 2012. Accessed at http://chronicle.com/article/For-Penn-States-Leaders-an/132849 on November 3, 2014.

16 See Linda Darling-Hammond for one summary of these criticisms. Linda Darling-Hammond, "Why the NCTQ Teacher Prep Ratings are Nonsense," *The Washington Post*. June 18, 2013. Accessed at http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2013/06/18/why-the-nctq-teacher-prep-ratings-are-nonsense on November 6, 2014.

17 Donald Heller, Avner Segall, and Corey Drake. "An Open Letter to NCTQ on Teacher Prep," *Education Week*, December 11, 2013. pp. 28–29. Accessed at http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2013/12/11/14heller.h33.html on November 6, 2014.

8

HOW TO WRITE AN INFLUENTIAL PRESS RELEASE

Kat Stein

Let's say you have an important story or piece of research – something that could, or maybe should, change public policy, opinions, or how your organization is perceived. If only people understood the importance of your research. You do not want your news to stay locked in a dusty academic journal. You want it to have an impact. How do you get the word out there? How do you break through and get a reporter's attention for coverage? One powerful communications tool is a press release. Unfortunately, hundreds upon thousands of press releases go unnoticed and unread daily. What do you need to know to make *your* press release effective?

Press release, news release, media release – they're just different names for the communication you're going to send to journalists and media outlets to get them interested in your story.

When devising your press release, ask yourself these questions:

- Who do I want to reach?
- How do I reach them?

Who Do I Want To Reach?

The first step is to determine whom you want to reach and the logistics of getting your story to them. Reporters are trusted intermediaries between you and your audience. Most reporters have a beat, or a subject they cover. They also know the likely audience for their work. By keeping this in mind, you can develop a more effective strategy for reaching the readers and viewers that matter most for your organization. Pay attention to mainstream media coverage of your subject area all the time, not just when you're releasing news. After all, these publications are the major way the public understands your subject. If a reporter does a story on your specialty, but doesn't cover a specific area, you might want to reach out to him or her with a friendly, "just to make you aware" email. They might be more inclined to use you as a source in the future, and are more likely to pay attention to that press release when it does arrive. In my work in education, although I aim my communications toward journalists, I am hyperaware of the audience for their publications. I am especially interested in reaching education policymakers, who may be making decisions without adequate or trusted information. An inside-the-Beltway e-newsletter in Washington DC may be a more important target for me than *The New York Times* because of its audience.

We also know that it is increasingly difficult to get the attention of a journalist or blogger, much less persuade them to write about your work – no matter how you reach out to them. Journalists at outlets like *The New York Times* might get hundreds of email "pitches" or press releases a day. Even a trade magazine or journal covering your field of interest is bombarded with pitches.

How Do I Reach Them?

There are a myriad ways to connect with the right reporters. When possible, your best, easiest way is to tap into your university

communications team and find out what they can do for you. Usually university communications teams have access to a database comprising thousands of journalists, such as the company Vocus. For an annual fee, communications professionals can mine these databases to create press lists. They might be able to look up reporters who have written upon a particular issue, for example the loss in bee population in the United States. They might be able to create a list of every environmental reporter who reaches a readership or circulation of over 50,000 people, and even find the ones that have written about bees. Although communications professionals are often a bit proprietary over lists they have developed (the equivalent of a sales person handing over all their good sales leads), it is always worth asking if they might be able to make their lists available to you, send your news out through their lists – or help you create your own lists to accomplish your goals. They also have relationships with reporters, and might be able to connect you with them with a simple phone call.

Tip

Communications professionals in academia are often pulled in many directions, and tend to be highly under-resourced. To work with them effectively, engage these pros in your work early in the process, and communicate clear timelines for when your news finally will be available. They might be able to provide valuable feedback about what the media will be interested in ahead of time, suggest additional strategies such as gathering photographs or video. At the very least, they will be looped in and invested in your project. They can also tell you what you can expect from your communications efforts and how they can help. Be realistic – not everything is front page news. Ask communications professionals what they might need in order to plan and in what form. Try to give them the data, summaries and background, and set aside time for an exclusive communications planning meeting a few weeks before you are ready to go out with news. If you are working with a team, appoint a point person to touch base consistently with communications. You would be surprised at what comes of treating them as a trusted resource for this final important step of your work.

But perhaps you do not have access to a university communications professional. If possible, begin developing relationships

with journalists who might be interested in covering your work – or even better, who might want to use you as an ongoing resource in other stories. This is an important first step before writing a word of a press release. Take note of journalists who have written about your topic over time, or do web searches on your topic plus the publication you are targeting. If there is another academic in your arena receiving press coverage, do a web search for their name to see which reporters have been writing stories about their work.

One place to look is the working pressroom at major academic conferences. Often a handful of key journalists in your topic area attend these events looking for news. Find journalists, ask them about what they are finding interesting about the conference and establish a relationship. If a reporter calls you at any point, keep their contact information! Over time, you will develop an ongoing list of media who know who you are and are therefore interested in what you have to say. This is perhaps one of the most useful and rarely used communications strategies for an academic. Do not depend on your communications department to keep tabs – a list like this is your valuable personalized resource. You might want to add notes next to names on your list in addition to their email addresses and publications. Well-known faculty communicators have had great success by keeping such lists, and regularly send out news to these contacts, even as their public relations departments send press releases out through their own channels. Often, reporters will recognize your name from your email, and, already interested in your work, are more likely to call you to get more information. This strategy consistently produces results.

Tip

Patience is important; you will build your contacts over time. Establish your reputation with the reporters who are most interested in your work, and then expand out from there. Be responsive when they call.

Time to Write and Send a Press Release

Now that you are prepared with your list of targeted journalists, it is time to write the press release. Find an order to your process that

works for you. I often begin with my headline as a way of developing a kind of thesis statement and write my release from there – boiling the story down to its essential elements. Laying out your news in simple, easily understood, terms is the first, and most significant of your steps. You are the expert, but it's important that you convey the significance of your news in a clear and accessible way that a layperson could understand. No one, including experts in your field, wants to read through impenetrable jargon-riddled language. Your finding or news needs to feel like a story that you might read in a publication.

Keep in mind that journalism today is quite different from even five years ago. Publications have cut staff to the bone (and beyond) to survive, and journalists often do not have the time to devote to proactive in-depth reporting. They are often pressured to produce shorter, less thoughtful pieces. It can be a challenge to connect with beleaguered reporters in this environment, and well-presented communications are critical. If your findings or news are hard to quickly grasp, then you will again find your email quickly deleted. This is not to say that you need to dumb down or over-simplify your news – it means that you have to craft your message along with your approach. Throughout the process, focus on explaining *why* your news matters to real people. That context is often more important for reporters than *what* your news actually is.

Tip

Recognize if breaking complicated work into easily understood ideas for the layperson is *not* your strength. That's okay; you are the brilliant person who has done all the work to create the news. Now, it's time to find someone who can translate it to the public. It could be a communications professional within your university, a student or outside professional. At my school, the former dean invested in an on-staff writer/editor who works full-time with the faculty to edit and proof their writing. Many were skeptical, but over the years, the position has had a pivotal influence, even having a profound effect on tenure or on the quality and quantity of peer-reviewed journals where faculty work appears. Previous to his appointment at the school, this dean had personally hired editors throughout his long and successful career to review and proof his work

(I might add, he is an excellent writer/editor). He considered it a crucial investment, whether his work was aimed at highly narrow academic publications or going out to mainstream journalists.

Since almost every press release is now sent by email, your subject line is your first and often only opportunity to communicate your message. Avoid dull headlines, but it is also important that you do not employ hyperbole or over-sell your news. Tailor your headline strategy to your announcement. Do you think you have something surprising to share about a topic? How about "3 Surprising Things About X Topic You Didn't Know"? Think about what email headlines compel *you* to open an unknown email. Don't waste most of your subject line with "New research from the University of XXX." Try a few possibilities out – perhaps one that asks a question, another that delivers an important statistic or finding immediately, or perhaps one that offers a strong point of view. Quantitative data holds a special attraction for the media, especially if it can be connected to the lives of their readers or the public. For example, if you were an education researcher releasing findings about colleges' influence on minority student success, an email subject line might read:

> "5 Reasons Colleges Miss the Boat with Minority Education"
>
> "How are Colleges Failing Their Minority Students?"
>
> "New Study Casts Blame on Colleges for Their Minority Student Struggles"

Once you have tempted a reporter into opening your email, make sure that your headline underscores or further excites their interest. It is fine to repeat your email headline, but include a sub-head with further information:

> 5 Reasons Colleges Miss the Boat with Minority Students
>
> *Findings from XXX University Offer New Perspective on Who is Getting It Wrong – and Who is Getting It Right*

Press releases are largely written utilizing the organizational structure of a news story. Think about the "who, what, where, when and why" that journalists employ, with the first paragraph providing the big picture about your work, and each subsequent paragraph providing increasing detail. A journalist should be able to have a clear understanding of your news after reading this first paragraph. In academic parlance, your opening paragraph is a kind of short abstract. Do not forget to put the name of your university or affiliation in that first paragraph, which helps to establish your credibility.

Better yet, give them a story rather than just facts and figures. Emphasize the human element or human impact as part of your message. Journalists are in fact storytellers and will be asked to turn your news into a narrative. It is helpful to get them partway there. At the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education, we have a faculty member who studies big data around education. He does not work with individuals, but studies populations of students within Philadelphia. Now, that can get pretty complicated very fast. A dry opening paragraph might be:

> Researchers from the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education have cross-referenced and synthesized data from across social service agencies in Philadelphia. Findings suggest that children with multiple risk factors and clear protective factors are affected in different ways. The study's data was resourced from all third graders in Philadelphia with a focus on educational outcomes. With this actionable intelligence, city agencies can now create customized solutions for discrete populations in poverty.

Instead, how about:

> All children in poverty are not created alike when it comes to getting an education in Philadelphia. City agencies working with researchers at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education have pooled their data to create an unprecedented and nuanced snapshot of the effects of poverty on children's lives – and how factors such as homelessness and low maternal education impact their education. Armed with this knowledge, the city is now devising targeted solutions that hold great promise for Philadelphia's children – and may be a role model for cities nationwide.

The entire press release, which utilizes the language and style of a newsroom, provides clear building blocks for a journalist to develop a story around your news. Your efforts should be no longer than the equivalent of two printed pages. Additional paragraphs allow you to continue to support your initial statements. Use bullet points for visual clarity, if possible. Consider adding in a quote from you that moves the narrative of your news along in some way. This is an excellent place to put an opinion or conclusion about your news, and reporters sometimes lift it whole cloth for their articles. It also gives reporters insight into what you might have to say in an interview. Again, think about why this work matters. If for any reason your release is longer than the equivalent of two pages, you are presenting too much information. Think of a release as an invitation to a journalist to learn more. If he or she accepts, you can explain your beloved bit of granularly specific detail during an interview. Realistically, the reporter would probably need to ask you a follow-up question about it anyway. A final paragraph should be a summary or "boilerplate" about your university or affiliation. Typically, this is something a communications professional within your school will have already developed.

Adding Links and Visuals

As news has migrated to the digital realms, visuals have become an increasingly important element to include in your message. I have learned that no press release should go out without a photo, even if it is the researcher's headshot. Keeping in mind that you do not want an email to get too large, you can include a low-res, captioned "jpg" format photo at the end of your release, with text and a link to the high-resolution image (ex. "for a high-resolution copy of this photo, click here). Consider creating an infographic if you have quantitative data – there are how-to sites with tools to make professional visuals that you can explore. If you have video, put a link at the bottom, again with a caption, which links to your video footage. Ideally, a reporter will have the option to embed your infographic or video right into their story as it runs online. They have an added art element to enhance their coverage, and you get your message out directly.

Tip

Commercial newswire services are an expensive but helpful resource. These paid services take your press release and move it through their own unique distribution channels that also connect with newsrooms. They have found that simply including a photo or video (for an additional fee) can triple the attention you receive. News organizations for the public typically have editors who keep an eye out for stories on both the official newswires (such as Associated Press or Reuters) as well as the commercial newswires such as Business Wire and PR Newswire. These paid services can be extraordinarily effective and their staff can also give you great advice about how to tailor your press release for maximum distribution. The commercial newswire business is also changing rapidly. Many have begun to offer services to create infographics and videos through their own digital multimedia teams for your work. However, using these newswires can be expensive, and you must weigh your return on investment. At the very least, newswire distribution can help with search engine optimization (SEO).

Understand that your successful strategies may need to be tweaked occasionally. For example, a few years ago, it was important to populate a press release with multiple links to improve its SEO. Recent changes in Google's algorithms now punish link-loaded press releases. Presently, press releases with approximately three good specific web page links actually do better in Google's rankings. This, of course, may change again.

In addition to visuals, what else should you be linking to? If you're publicizing research, add a link to the paper or report, if one is available. Not every reporter will have the time or inclination to read all of the work, but you'd be surprised how many will. You can connect to your university's website, usually within the boilerplate. I would suggest that your name be linked to your biography page on the school's website.

I would also encourage you to find ways to create your own digital clearinghouse of scholarship. You can present further information or data on such a web page. Much academic research is lost within the highest echelons of the Ivory Tower, the academic journal. I like to think of posting research as releasing it into the wild – you are giving it an opportunity to connect with audiences that might never have found it over time otherwise and giving it a longer life span.

Never underestimate what people might be trying to Google. If your school posts press releases, make sure that yours is included on the site.

Tip

The concept of digitally archiving and organizing your scholarship is something that is just beginning to evolve. Elements might be a personal website or a robust official biography page. My school's faculty can create customized tabs for their biography pages where they can store more information about their work. Some scholars have created links to multiple research topics and include everything from links to their peer-reviewed publications, links to press coverage, downloadable infographics and more. Other faculty members have their own standalone sites that connect from their bio page. Interested parties can dig into a scholar's work from multiple angles, and the ongoing page also helps a scholar's personal SEO. At the University of Pennsylvania, we also have an in-house IT team with a web designer on staff, and an easily updatable system (using Drupal) – which allows individuals to quickly and easily make changes to their own pages.

Now that your release is done, with appropriate links and visual, cut and paste your press release into the body of the email. A pet peeve for many reporters is an email attachment – it makes it harder to glance through your information, and, in the case of PDFs, difficult to pull out explanatory language or information. Attachments also carry viruses – and having them is a surefire way to ensure your press release is deleted. Another way to irritate a journalist is to send them a huge email file cluttered with high-resolution logos and images that clog up their inbox.

Make sure your release has contact information. If a reporter is interested in your news, whom should he or she call? Make sure the person listed as the media contact can actually be reached. Sending out a release at 4:30 p.m. and leaving the office at 5 with no way to reach you is as good as not sending out a release at all.

Tip

If your press list is small, you may want to place a quick, personalized note above your press release for each reporter. It could be as simple as "I thought you would be interested in this. Please give me a call if you want further information." If your list is too large, make sure that you populate the bcc line rather than the "To" address line so that reporters do not see who else you are contacting, and cannot "reply all."

Final Steps

Once you send out a press release to your list of contacts, the work is only partly done. It's important that either you or your communications team calls or even tweets at reporters that are important to your story. Increasingly, people rely on email to do all their work, and I find that it is often relatively easier to connect with a reporter by phone or Twitter as a result. Send a press release before 10 a.m. if possible, before journalists have begun writing their stories for the day. Unless your release is related to breaking news in the world, avoid sending it out on a Friday, especially Friday afternoon. A follow-up phone call from you personally (even if it is a voicemail) letting them know that you have sent them a release, what your interesting news is, and how to reach you if they are interested can be an important way to break through the clutter. Once I have connected with a reporter, they will often "fish" out my press release from their emails and take a longer look. Sometimes they ask me to send it to them again – be patient, and cheerfully send it again. You have gotten their interest!

Tip

If you have funding, budget for communications as part of the project. Costs could include the outsourcing of public relations, writing, sending out information via commercial newswires, buying press lists, video production, websites, and creating infographics, just to name a few. I have noticed that academics in my own organization have begun to realize that even presenting findings via a graphically designed report can increase its impact greatly. Rather than being slick and commercial, it is perceived as professional and more credible.

Tip

Consider sending a pitch letter instead of a release. Or a pitch note above your press release. A pitch email is usually a simple, hopefully persuasive, summary of your work, and can often take the place of a press release. This takes more time than sending out a press release en masse. Often, it is helpful to do a search for recent stories that the targeted journalist has written, particularly around your topic, and tailor your pitch to their interest. You might want to mention that you have read their recent work on the project, and perhaps make a point about something in their piece. Understand what they are interested in. Be pithy and be ready with more detailed materials, such as a press release, overview, summary, or website link.

Be responsive to media requests in general! Reporters are always on deadline and are looking for someone they can rely on for an interesting perspective. Once your news is out, make sure that you set aside time for a few days for any media requests that come in. A *Wall Street Journal* reporter on deadline once reached out to speak to one of my faculty members on an important topic that dovetailed with the faculty member's research. Excited, I reached out to the professor, only to be told that he would only have time to speak to the reporter in a couple of weeks. Needless to say, he lost coverage of his work and the reporter never called for him again.

Tip

Finally, understand the journalist's world enough to make yourself useful. Did you know that journalists are often averse to connecting with academics? Why? One reason is that some professors have a tendency to go into long-winded, difficult to understand explanations about their area of expertise (perhaps a surprise to no one). Put yourself in a reporter's shoes – what are the important things to know in terms that their readers will understand? Listen to their questions carefully. Although they will need explanatory background information, reporters are also looking for a quote or quotes for their story – something that can be difficult to extract from academics. In addition to challenges on length of verbiage, some academics seemingly want the research to speak for itself. You are, however, the definitive expert on the topic and a reporter values your insights.

The actual writing of a press release may follow a deceptively simple formula, but there is more to a press release than its structure. Building and taking ownership of relationships with the media are powerful ways for your work to have an impact. Distinguishing between dispensing information and telling a story is crucial. Developing insight into the needs of a journalist, including prioritizing your availability when they call, can make you a trusted ongoing contact. With just a little effort, you can be a communications maven.

Quick Tips List

1. Decide which journalists you want to reach and build email lists with those press targets.
2. Develop insights into the needs of journalists to better inform your press communications.
3. Consider creating a digital presence for your work through your faculty bio or a stand-alone website.
4. Write a press release that tells a story in simple, easy to understand terms with a sense of narrative.
5. Add visuals and links to your press release.