

Gaining television coverage for your project

If you've read the guide about promoting your work in the press, you will know how to write a press release that grabs the editor's attention and leads to publication. The same principles can be broadly applied to television news slots, but you need to adapt that approach slightly. Television is a more visual medium, and you will also need to have someone available for interview who is both knowledgeable about your project and articulate.

Having a media strategy may sound too formal for a small group, but if there is some aspect of your project that would appeal to a television editor or programmer, take advantage of that. You will reach a far larger and wider audience than through any other media (regional news programme, for example, are transmitted across several counties), and for little or no cost.

You've no doubt noticed that many television programmes, from the regional news to *Strictly Come Dancing*, are based around a format of two presenters, one male and one female. They take turns to read from an autocue, looking at their colleague from time to time when the colleague is speaking. Closer study reveals that individual news items also follow a recognisable format, which was memorably satirised by Charlie Brooker, and is available to watch on YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aHun58mz3vI>) (please be aware there is strong language in here at 0:25).

Once you recognise the preferred format, you can produce a press release for the television company that will allow their journalist to slot the information you have provided into that format. All they then have to do is to select some stock photographs to go with it, to decide what questions to ask you on camera, and perhaps to request some 'action shots' that you would be happy to supply. By making the journalist's job easier, you are more likely to see

your piece included in a news report. From there, it might be picked up by the local and even national press, giving you even more free publicity for your project.

However, when compiling your press release it's not enough simply to relate details of your findings. They may be fascinating to you, but why should they interest a wider audience? People like to watch interesting features when they turn on their sets, and these days there are plenty of other channels they can switch to. The editor is looking for a story that will engage the attention of viewers, some of whom may live many miles away, and may never have heard of your village. You therefore need to provide a strong 'hook' to grab the editor's attention. Make it clear within your press release precisely why your research or project is interesting, and why it matters, not just to you, but to the wider world. For maximum effect, make sure you include one or two of the following angles:

- Topicality (to a recent news item, cinema release, TV programme, etc.)
- Human interest
- Drama
- Conflict
- Humour

Before sending in your press release, make sure you are prepared should a journalist contact you to run your piece. You will need to have two or three names in mind of people from your group who will be willing to talk on camera, who will be available for filming, who speak clearly, are knowledgeable about the project and can think quickly if an unusual question is put to them on air. You also need to think about a good location for filming. If outdoors, this would preferably be away from traffic noise, although some background noise that is relevant to your project can help to create a picture. The background should say something about the project or about the people being interviewed, but you need to accept that they may be looking for a clichéd shot – the historian in a room full of books, or the scientist in a white coat with a pipette in hand, for example. Be aware that the production team will probably want some action shots illustrating what people have been doing, and perhaps decide in advance what you or your group members would be prepared to do, and what feels undignified or silly.

Remember that the journalist who contacts you will probably have no more information about your project than your press release. You need to sell your project to that journalist in the first instance, and ensure he or she understands it, as you will not be able to control what is said in the introduction to your piece, or how the filming is edited. Your press release should make it easy for the journalist to know what questions to ask in order to trigger responses from you that will interest the viewer. The answers to three key questions

must therefore always be contained within that press release, and should be included near the top, and not buried within the detail:

- What are you doing? (information)
- Why are you doing it? (Application)
- Why does it matter? (Implication)

By all means think of one or two good but short phrases you might be able to work into a piece to camera, but don't force them in if the opportunity does not arise. You do not need to have a 'soundbite' at the ready, and they can look unnatural and forced. But if there is anything controversial about your project, have a good answer ready for any difficult question.

As well as an interview and some action shots, a news piece will often also include some still photographs. The company will probably use stock images, but make it easy for them by giving clues in your press release about the types of things you have been doing, so they can decide in advance the type of images that would be suitable.

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