

Ideas on Public Profile and External Communications: A Training and Advice Session for PhD Students and Junior Faculty

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Andrew Oswald, Professor of Economics, Warwick University

I am happy to chat about how to create an impact within the academic community, but I thought I would concentrate instead on what you might call outside or media profile.

So I have in mind especially

- Newspapers
- Magazines
- Radio
- TV

Of these, the impact of TV is easily the biggest. The power of television is really startling. Universities still have little idea of how to exploit it, I would say.

Public profile and publicity

The first thing to say is that it never crossed my mind that I would ever take part in this kind of world. I was a regular -- though no doubt rather workaholic -- academic. All I cared about was academic journals.

The professors who taught me never appeared on TV or radio, and never wrote newspaper articles, so I grew up thinking that this was not something that serious people did. It was for lightweights, was the impression I was subconsciously given. Yet when I went to the US for a bit I realized that the best academics in that country took a big part in real life; they were constantly quoted in the media; they wrote for the New York Times as well as the American Economic Review.

Why do I do it?

The honest answer is that I am not completely sure, but here is an attempt.

Evangelical reasons. I suppose I went into academic economics to improve the world (that was the way I thought when in my early 20s).

Warwick is still a new university, and I like to think that publicity is valuable for our university.

It makes me feel my ideas matter. Neighbours, family and friends get a better understanding of what I do.

Adrenalin. Variety. These things are actually quite exciting, I find. My first live radio and TV appearances were fairly frightening. Overcoming fear is incredibly interesting. [Eleanor Roosevelt said something like 'you gain strength and confidence in life by every experience in which you stop to look fear in the face', and I think there is something to that, personally, but it can certainly hurt a bit along the way.]

Not for the money: TV and radio pay essentially zero, and even a giant article in The Times or FT pays only 300 pounds or so. I doubt I get better remunerated at Warwick because of it, or promoted more, but maybe I do a little, or perhaps people will in the future as universities get more competitive.

Main Suggestions

Send out press releases. Your university's public affairs office will help, and be delighted to advise you.

Have something to say. Don't fill it with caveats. Don't use jargon.

Be courteous to journalists when they call. Build up a network of contacts with journalists. This takes years to do but may last a lifetime. They need you; if you want to be known outside universities, you need them. People sometimes ask me: what do journalists want? Well just put yourself in their place is my view. They want someone interesting to quote in their articles, and someone they can get hold of reasonably easily who won't be grumpy with them.

Make sure they use the Warwick name!

Don't expect too much of yourself.

For the first year or two, just aim at being mildly competent. Expect to be slightly nervous of talking on the phone to print journalists, and probably very nervous when you start doing radio or (later) TV.

Things to bear in mind

Women, for once in life, have a big advantage, especially on television. If you are a female academic and want to be 'famous', you can almost certainly do it if you work hard at that. TV producers dislike having parades of middle-aged men in dark suits.

If you do get on a programme, watch yourself or listen to yourself afterwards. It is horrible but otherwise you don't learn what you are like.

When you write for a newspaper, or give a quote to a journalist, get used to being misquoted or heavily edited into different words. Only the FT and The Economist, in my experience, can be relied on to be accurate. Do not complain to the newspaper.

Accept that you will quite often be cancelled at the last minute. About 20% of all recordings I do never, in the end, see the light of day. Sometimes one is cancelled with 10 seconds to go.

Tips (just my opinion)

Don't be snobbish would be my advice. I do not really distinguish much between phone calls from Cosmopolitan magazine, The Lincoln Echo, The Sun, The FT, BBC2 Newsnight, or Radio Gloucester.

One day, after you begin to be known, you will eventually have to face TV and therefore what image you want to give out on television. Unless you are on for a long time, people see you much more than hear your argument. I am a suit and tie person, but always have been more than most academics. If you are a man much over 40, or you are younger but going to talk on a solemn subject, then probably a tie is natural (in which case I recommend a darkish plain jacket, lightish plain shirt, and a fairly bright tie). If you are a young man, then smart casual is fine. Scruffy is not very sensible, though. Neat haircuts are helpful, my daughters tell me, but personally I feel it is fine for academics to be a bit eccentric.

I don't know too much about how to dress if you are a woman on TV – sorry. Dark with a splash of colour would be my thought, at least on a serious subject. My daughters tell me that it is mistake for women to wear much jewellery.

If you can, speak slowly on radio. It is so easy, when you are under pressure, to speed up.

If you can smile while doing radio or TV, it really helps. I actually find it quite hard (too serious by nature..). You wouldn't think that smiling while on radio could make a difference but it does.

Use everyday language. Hence I try not to use the word 'equilibrium', although we do all the time in economics seminars. I use something like 'balance'. If you have never thought about it, you would be amazed how much jargon you use.

Have a simple voice-mail message. Check your messages. Call the journalists back! It sounds obvious but most academics don't do these things.

Have a website with downloadables. I bought www.oswald.co.uk and www.andrewoswald.com when they were cheap. I recommend you buy your name; it only costs 50 pounds or less and will last your lifetime, of course. I think I last bought a name through UKdomains.net, but there are tons of sellers if you search the web.

I put my newspaper-style articles on my website as well as the formal economics papers. Again, amazingly, most academics don't bother. Although it has taken years to build up, I get about 1000 downloads a week. Goodness knows who they all are. Most of them are probably students in other countries, but certainly plenty of journalists do read my site.

Expect to be asked about your own life. I was on Newsnight a couple of weeks ago and the last question, live, was "Are you putting your own home up for sale Prof Oswald?". I had been talking about the likelihood of a housing crash. Or when I was on radio talking about marriage I was asked "How long have you been married?" They love to see the human side of academics.

Don't give out a mobile telephone number if you will get cross if they call you. I don't carry a mobile, but the journalists can never believe it. Once I was on cross-channel ferry, halfway down a ramp in our car, when my daughter's mobile went off and it was the BBC wanting something or other. To this day we have no idea how they got the number.

Expect to have your personal life sometimes disrupted. You have to make choices. If you always say "no I am going out to dinner, or I am too busy now because of XYZ" then they will stop contacting you. But to do so occasionally is, of course, fine.

Final thoughts

I try to emphasise my research, I think. In other words, I hope I get quoted in the media mainly because I have done something serious on the topic under discussion. My philosophy is to keep writing my formal, scientific papers as well as the more accessible stuff. There is a danger that you begin to realise that one article in The Times has a much bigger impact than a dozen academic papers, but I feel -- this is just my view -- that it is important to keep being a real academic, if one can use that term, alongside the public profile role.

There is a global market for ideas. If you hide from the world, your ideas will probably disappear, and I suppose I didn't want that to happen to mine.

In this sphere of life, there is no right way to behave, in my view. I didn't set out to copy someone else's style and I advise you not to do so -- though it is fine to get ideas from them. Just do what suits you.

If you are still at Warwick, make sure, again, they use the university's name. If you have moved to another university by then, it is fine by me if you forget this piece of advice...

Andrew

ps. If you ever need me or want me to advise, feel absolutely free to call me on 02476 523510 (work) or 01367 860005 (home office), or send me an email at andrew.oswald@warwick.ac.uk. Best of luck with it all.

