

Media Guide for Researchers

Leiden University, 2023



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1. Researchers in the media

Researchers are sought after guests in the media. They are often invited to appear on radio and TV programmes or give interviews for newspaper articles, they take part in debates in podcasts and online features, and they show journalists with cameras and sound teams around their labs. Leiden University really appreciates your making the effort and taking the time to share your work with a wider audience. We stimulate media contributions and employ people who can help you navigate media appearances. But ultimately, as a researcher, you are the one who has to tell your story. To make this process easier, we have created this media guide with practical tips to help you with media appearances.

“ Science communication is essential in demonstrating the impact of our research, and showing society what we do as a University and why our work is valuable for everyone. ”

Professor Hester Bijl, Rector Magnificus of Leiden University

2. When do you appear in the media?

There are a number of situations in which journalists may contact you. These situations each have their own dynamic.

A journalist may contact you in response to your own research results, for example because the University has published a news report on its website or issued a press release in consultation with you.

In such cases, the initiative rests with you as researcher. You have some news which you would like to bring to the media's attention. A press release has been published and you are aware of its content. It is about your own research, and you are perfectly capable of preparing for any questions.

In other cases, contact with journalists may arise more unexpectedly. For example, if a journalist seeks your expert opinion on a current development. This is not always something you are ready for. You may not have the time, or sufficient knowledge about the topic in question; you may not know exactly why the journalist has chosen you of all people, or the request may simply come at an inconvenient time.

This guide covers these two situations in greater detail. It contains practical tips on what to expect before, during and after an interview, how you can prepare, also in the case of an unexpected interview request, and other things you can do to make your media appearance a success.

2.1 When the University publishes a news report and/or issues a press release in consultation with you

If you have published some research results that may be interesting for the media, the University is more than willing to help you bring this to their attention. If this is the case, please contact the University's [science communication adviser \(SC&M\)](#), or your [faculty communications department](#) to discuss the options for publicising your results. They

can help you write a news article for the university website and other platforms, and possibly actively bring this to the media's attention in the form of a press release.

Some things to consider in this situation:

- A press release can be seen as an invitation to journalists to contact you to ask questions about your research. You should therefore make sure that you are easy to reach by telephone or email for up to one week after the news is announced.
- Be prepared. Think beforehand of any questions that journalists might ask, find out more about your audience, and if needed prepare a few points you would like to emphasise. See also Chapter 3 on how to prepare for an interview and tips to help you during the interview and afterwards.

2.2 If a journalist calls you to discuss a current development

There may be all sorts of reasons why a journalist would want to speak to a researcher. They may be looking for an expert to explain a current event or development. In that case, they will usually quote you in a newspaper or magazine, or on a website. A journalist may also be looking for background information on a given topic, without necessarily wanting to publish this information. In that case, your interview will be part of the journalist's research (often in preparation for a publication). If a journalist calls you on behalf of a radio or TV programme, they are usually looking for someone for a studio interview.

A phone call from a journalist often comes unexpectedly, which might mean that you do not have factual and nuanced answers ready. Don't hesitate to ask the journalist for some more background information: What is this about exactly? What does the journalist want from you? And why have they chosen to contact you? Think not only from the perspective of the questions being asked, but also from the perspective of what you have to offer. Journalists will usually appreciate your thinking along.

Some things to consider in this situation:

- It is perfectly normal to tell a journalist that you need some time to think about the questions, so don't hesitate to do so. If you ask for more time, communicate clearly when you will call them back.
- A journalist may contact you about a topic that is further removed from your area of expertise, or that may better match the expertise of one of your colleagues. In that case, it is a good idea to refer the journalist to the colleague in question or to a University press officer/spokesperson.
- Journalists often work with tight deadlines, so don't be surprised if a journalist calls you for an interview that is due to appear in the newspaper the next day, or online or on the radio that very same day. Sometimes, you will have more time. Specialised science journalists usually have more generous deadlines, for example when writing for a weekend supplement or a monthly.
- For a radio or TV programme, the editor will always want a preliminary interview, usually at short notice. This kind of interview often involves exploring a topic (and your vision on it) in more depth, but the editor will also be assessing your level of expertise, your self-confidence and your skills as a speaker. It may happen that a preliminary interview leads to the decision not to invite you into the studio. Or a planned interview may get cancelled or rescheduled because of more urgent news.
- Unfortunately, some Dutch radio and TV shows only want guests who can speak Dutch. If they discover that you are not a Dutch speaker (or do not feel confident enough or have the right vocabulary to talk about your work in Dutch), you may receive a very curt response. Try not to take this personally: it says nothing about you or your work and everything about the format of the radio or TV show.



3. Before, during and after an interview

If you are invited for an interview for an article or a radio or TV programme, you should carefully weigh the pros and cons of this kind of media appearance.

A media appearance is a good way of disseminating your insights more broadly, involving society in your work, or offering accountability for research that is often funded with public funds. It allows you to demonstrate the value of science in addressing societal issues and challenges.

Media appearances are also a good way to increase your own and/or your institute's or University's fame and reputation. It is also a useful exercise in talking about your research to non-experts, and many researchers really enjoy it.

But a media appearance can also evoke criticism, especially on social media. Particularly if you talk about issues that are relevant to society or topics that are subject to public debate. And unfortunately there is often a lack of common decency on social media. Do be aware that the university will support you if you experience this, and see Chapter 4 in this guide for more information. It also depends which medium has invited you, whether it is a radio or TV interview and which other guests have been invited. We will look at this more closely in Chapter 4.

If you are reluctant to enter into dialogue with the media, if you don't have the time for it, or if you feel you are not ready, communicate this clearly. Remember that you can always decline a request from a journalist. In case of doubt, you can always consult your colleagues, or your faculty's or the University's science communication adviser. These are also the people to contact if you need extra media training or if you would like to practise for your interview.



“ Our goal is to create an open knowledge society. As researchers, we can contribute to this by feeding and enriching the public debate with our research results, but also by explaining how science works. Debate and uncertainty are an inherent part of that. ”

Ineke Sluiter, Professor of Greek Language and Literature at Leiden University and President of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW)



3.1 Practical aspects to consider before an interview

There are some things you can always do in preparation for an interview, irrespective of the medium (newspaper, TV, radio, etc.). The points below can also help you decide whether or not to agree to an interview request.

- Ask for the name of the journalist/editor and their contact details.
- Ask for the name of the programme, newspaper, magazine or website, and which section your interview will appear in. Do you know this publication? If not, find out more about it. Who are their target audience? How big is their reach? Ask for a link to a broadcast or website, or a PDF of the latest issue.
- Ask the journalist questions about the context, the background and their chosen perspective: What does the journalist want from you exactly, and why?
- Ask about the time line. When is the journalist supposed to deliver the item or article?
- Ask about the length of the article or item and ask how big your contribution will be: just a few short quotes or an extensive interview?
- Ask to preview the article or item before it is published, so you can correct any factual inaccuracies or poorly contextualised quotes. Also see the information under ‘Make agreements’ later in this chapter.
- Make it clear what you have to offer, apart from answers to the questions. Most journalists appreciate hearing your expert opinion and input, and this can help you steer the conversation. You may be able to say a lot more about a topic if the journalist reformulates their question slightly.
- Ask the journalist whether they need any information beforehand, such as a recent academic paper, so they can read up about the topic. Also see the information under ‘Other experts or speakers’ later in this chapter.
- Ask who else will be mentioned in the article or item. Especially in the case of a radio show, it is good to know who will be joining you at the table. Consider whether you feel comfortable sharing the stage with this person or persons.



For radio and TV interviews, whether recorded or live, there are some specific things you may want to ask about beforehand:

- Ask the radio or TV programme who will be conducting the interview. This is usually not the editor who contacts you. You can Google the interviewer beforehand or look them up in preparation.
- Ask the radio or TV programme whether the interview will be recorded or broadcast live.
- Ask whether you can view the questions beforehand (or in any case the first question), so you can prepare and not be taken by surprise. This is especially important for radio and TV shows. In case of a TV interview, ask whether you can preview the 'instarts' (short videos inserted throughout the item). This is usually possible shortly before the broadcast, and it will help you prepare for what you will have to respond to.
- For live interviews, make sure you know beforehand how much speaking time you will have. This can help you choose what to say or not say.

Other experts or speakers

Journalists may ask critical questions in radio or TV interviews about your research. You can often prepare for these, with the tips above, for example. Some media – particularly the daily talk shows – like it if a researcher debates the matter at hand with a 'critic'. This will result in 'polemics' and 'both sides having their say'. The idea is that viewers can judge for themselves. However, this critic is by no means always another academic and is often much more direct, personal and unnuanced than you may be used to from colleagues. This makes it advisable to always find out who else will be sitting at the table and consider whether you want to discuss the matter with them. Ask whether you will have enough room to get your message across. Base your decision not only on the information that you get from the editor but also on your intuition. Does it feel right to discuss this specific topic in this setting?

If you are unsure, seek advice from experienced colleagues, your [faculty communication department](#) or the [science communication adviser](#). Some general tips on preparing for such an interview or discussion:

- 'Evidence' can be found on the internet for any dubious contention or conspiracy theory – often by selectively shopping in scientific publications or magnifying scientific uncertainties. Visit the websites of 'opponents' and familiarise yourself with the arguments they use.
- Emotions and feelings play an important role in many issues. Researchers like to look at facts and averages whereas individual experiences can differ. Show understanding for this. 'I can really understand that this is your experience but it isn't the case for most people.'
- Distinguish between your expertise/role as an expert and your opinion/feelings. Sometimes you can only answer emotion with emotion. Think of examples of this.

Make agreements

It may seem scary or uncomfortable but you can make agreements with most journalists or even negotiate before you agree to cooperate. Journalists are used to this and in the media world it's often a game of quid pro quo. If you want to set certain terms or reach certain agreements, do so before you begin an interview so that everything is clear in advance. Journalists are much less likely to grant requests made after the event. Things you could consider include:

- Approval before publication. In Dutch media, it's fairly customary to be able to see the article before it is published. Many journalists like this too, especially with complex topics. If you receive the article, only check the text for factual errors and out-of-context quotes. Don't try to rewrite long passages or the whole article. Journalists do not appreciate this. Be constructive, respect journalistic independence and only indicate the things that you think really are incorrect.
- Exclusivity. Sometimes journalists only want your story if it is exclusive. Then you can't speak to other media before the broadcast or publication. This can be attractive, for example if you will be given a lot of space/time in return or if the medium has a large national or international reach. If you make such an agreement, you obviously do have to stick to it.
- Embargo. Be clear about embargos on research results or agreements with commissioning parties/funding organisations. Journalists are used to working with embargos and generally respect them. Explain clearly what the

reason is for the embargo, for instance an inaugural lecture that is yet to be held or an article that is yet to be published in a scientific journal.

- **Title.** Discuss with the journalist how you want to be referred to/introduced – name, title, position, discipline, university. State your preferences beforehand. ‘Off the record’. Sometimes you want to share knowledge but don’t want to be quoted. Make this clear to the journalist beforehand and make sure they agree before you continue the conversation. Make sure you aren’t identifiable from the information and be aware that it is usual in the academic world to discuss things in the open.
- **Expenses/payment:** It is not usual in the Netherlands to ask to be paid for an interview with the news media. Journalism counts as the freedom to gather news and the free exchange of information. Expenses such as travel to a studio are reimbursed in some cases. In other cases, for instance if you are asked to write a whole article, you can ask for payment. The options depend on various things: what kind of contribution it is, how much work is expected of you, what platform your contribution will appear on, and so on.

(Expert) negotiation

You can also set other conditions for taking part in an interview. Think, for example, of a minimum amount of speaking time, or the guarantee that a specific topic will or will not be discussed in the interview. Or you may want the journalist to mention that you have recently published a book on the topic in question. You can also agree that you will be allowed to publish the article/interview on your own website.

Note: Negotiating opens news opportunities, but please be careful. Remember that journalists will always protect their independence and they may not always be willing or able to meet your conditions.

3.2 During the interview

As a rule, you can assume that you and the journalist have the same goal: creating a good article or item together. But you should also be aware that the interviewer, like any other interlocutor, will use techniques to try and seduce you into a response. These include silent pauses, or asking the same question in a different way. This can happen both in studio interviews and in telephone interviews for newspapers.

Below are some practical tips for interviews or (live) discussions.

If you want to find out more about this, or practise a bit because you expect to appear in the media shortly, contact your [faculty communications department](#) or the [science communication adviser](#) to find out about media training options.

General tips during the interview

- Always keep in mind the medium and the target audience. Is it a general or a specific audience? Are the target audience children or intellectual readers of *NRC Handelsblad*? Tune in to your audience, and adjust the way you tell your story accordingly. Clearly an interview for the *Jeugdjournaal* is very different from an interview for *Het Financieele Dagblad*. Don’t hesitate to adapt your style accordingly.
- Make sure you are clear about the core of your story. What is your main message and what should the reader/viewer/listener really know in order to understand it? Repeat this message on a regular basis.
- Use lively and concrete examples to support your research results. When discussing abstract topics, metaphors and comparisons can also come in useful. Ask for example whether you can use objects during a studio interview.
- Answer as directly as possible. Don’t start with a long academic prelude. Go straight to the point you want to make and then take some time to explain it in more detail.
- Pauses are a common technique used to elicit a response. Remember that there is nothing wrong with them and it is not your job to fill the silence if you feel you have said enough.

- Don't be too formal when talking about your own research, and show your passion for your work. You may want to prepare a personal anecdote to share.
- Journalists may ask you private questions in response to your research topic. For example, whether you have ever taken drugs yourself if you study addiction, what party you vote for if you are a political science expert, or how often you fly if your research focuses on sustainability. This personal aspect is often important for journalists who work for children's programmes or other general audience programmes. They want to help their target audience identify with the researcher. If you don't want to answer, think of a light or humorous way of avoiding such questions.
- Be honest if there is something you don't know. For example, because you didn't study it, or because you don't find it suitable in the context of the interview. Don't hesitate to say: 'This goes beyond my field of expertise', 'You would have to ask someone else about it', or 'This is not a question for a scientist (but for a politician, diplomat, etc.).'
- When on TV, ignore the camera and make eye contact with the interviewer and other guests.
- When on the radio or on TV, don't talk too fast and don't interrupt.
- When on TV, be aware of your body language: don't gesticulate too much (also not with your hands). This distracts viewers from your message.
- Make sure you notice when a journalist asks a leading question or gives an oversimplified summary of your nuanced story. 'So what you're actually saying is...!' Answer with 'What I'm saying is...' or 'The most important point is...'
- Re-direct the conversation if the interviewer deviates too much from the topic (your story). Create a bridge in an answer ('This reminds me of...') or literally ask attention for something: 'Is it all right if I also talk a bit about ...?'
- Don't allow yourself to be provoked by other guests. Don't get angry. Remain professional, and stay close to your own area of expertise.



3.3 After the interview

- After you've given an interview and checked the resulting article for inaccuracies, it may still happen that the final article is not as you expected. The heading and introduction are usually written by a chief editor and not by the journalist you spoke to. Unfortunately, you have little influence over this process, but it is good to be aware of it.
- Inform the University or your faculty communications department that you contributed to an item, including when it will be published or broadcast. Your faculty communications department can help you generate more attention for the item.
- Also share this article or media appearance with your own (online) networks, for instance on your social media.
- Sometimes an article or media appearance leads to other media also wanting to write about your research. You may be approached by other journalists, or journalists may simply take over each other's information. This dynamic may jeopardise the accuracy and nuance of the original message. Keep this in mind, and if you disagree with what is reported, contact the relevant media, even if you did not speak to them before.
- Keep the contact details of any journalists you have spoken to or who have shown interest in your research. You can always at a later stage take the initiative to contact them if you have something new to report. This is common practice, and journalists appreciate being personally informed of new developments.
- At the end, make up the balance for yourself. What did you learn from your media appearance? Did you enjoy it? What went well, and what would you do differently next time?

4. Social media

Social media is a platform that makes it easy to share and discuss your knowledge with others or stay informed of news and developments. It is an excellent way to tell people what you are up to and to hear the same from them. If you share your scientific expertise on social media, this can also make it easier for journalists to find you.

Every staff member (or student) from Leiden University is a kind of ambassador for the university. We therefore encourage you to use social media to share your knowledge with others, and we protect your freedom of speech, also online. But at the same time, this entails a big responsibility for you, also to uphold the values of our academic community.

4.1 Eight tips for social media

Use our tips to help make social media a positive experience.

1. **Be accurate, honest and decent**

Make sure you have your facts right and state your sources. If you are an academic, you are also one online and this is how you will be treated. If you make a mistake, admit this openly and if necessary offer your excuses.

2. **Respect your audience**

Think before posting anything online. Be respectful and courteous, in discussions too. Be open to different perspectives and opinions.

3. **Be proud of the university**

But never speak on behalf of the university. Do not use official logos on your private account.

4. **Be aware of liability and privacy**

Think about copyright. Do not share information about or photos of people without their permission. Do not post confidential information about Leiden University, its students, alumni or staff.

5. **Be aware of the relationship between your work and personal life**

If your profile mentions where you work, you may then be seen as an employee of Leiden University, even in your free time.

6. **Be authentic**

Online is not a separate world, so be the same person online as off.

7. **Take a look around**

Look at how others (colleagues for instance) use social media. Look at what appeals to you and follow their example. Talk to your colleagues or fellow students about whether you want to share things that you discuss in your work or studies.

8. **Moderate your comments and timeline**

Look daily at the comments you receive and respond quickly. Keep life pleasant for yourself (and your followers) by curating your timeline: block or mute inappropriate accounts or trolls.

An extra tip: also use your social media to share your media appearances, for example by sharing the link to an article or broadcast with a personal comment.

4.2 Criticism on social media

A lot of research is done at Leiden University into issues in society. Be aware that some topics may be sensitive and can evoke criticism. Unfortunately, some people on social media lack common decency and you may find yourself confronted with fierce or sometimes downright abusive reactions. Always be a good example in such situations and communicate openly. Say what you want to say but stick to the facts and your expertise, be nuanced and do not be unnecessarily provocative. This obviously does not mean using rude and/or threatening language. Nor will exclusion or discrimination be tolerated.

If you speak in the media about a sensitive subject and expect unpleasant reactions on social media, you can choose not to open your social media for a while and thus to ignore the reactions. Or you can protect your accounts as a precaution. You can always contact your faculty communication department to discuss the matter.



4.3 Threats

If you are the target of threats and/or persistently abusive posts on social media, please contact your colleagues at the Security Department:

- Leo Harskamp: l.j.t.harskamp@bb.leidenuniv.nl | 071 527 1191
- Jaap van Zaanen: j.van.zaanen@bb.leidenuniv.nl | 071 527 3802

The university will do all it can to help you.



5. Support and training

For help and support in your contact with the media, you can contact your faculty communications department or the science communication adviser at the Strategic Communication Directorate (SC&M). These are also the people to contact if you wish to bring news about your research to the media's attention or have other questions about communication.

5.1 Contacts

- **Science communication adviser (SC&M)**
Marieke Epping: m.epping@bb.leidenuniv.nl | 071 527 15221
- **Faculty of Archaeology**
Marten Jesse Pot: m.j.pot@arch.leidenuniv.nl | 071 527 2685
- **Faculty of Humanities**
communicatie@hum.leidenuniv.nl
- **Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs**
Judith van Doorn: j.e.van.doorn@fgga.leidenuniv.nl | 070 800 993
- **Faculty of Law**
communicatie@law.leidenuniv.nl
- **Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences**
communicatie@fsw.leidenuniv.nl
- **Faculty of Science**
news@science.leidenuniv.nl
- **Leiden University Medical Center/Faculty of Medicine**
pers@lumc.nl

In case of a threat

If you are the target of threats and/or sustained abusive posts on social media, please contact the Security Affairs department:

- Leo Harskamp: l.j.t.harskamp@bb.leidenuniv.nl | 071 527 1191
Jaap van Zaanen: j.van.zaanen@bb.leidenuniv.nl | 071 527 3802

5.2 Courses and training

At Leiden University we offer various training courses relating to science communication:

- Academic Outreach: An Introduction to Sharing Your Research via Social and Conventional Media is offered several times per year within the HRM PhD programme.
- Blogging About Your Research is a practical, interactive course that is offered several times a year by HRM.
- The Science Communication Summer School is held annually in Leiden and is organised by the Science, Communication and Society research group. It is open to researchers from all disciplines, from home and abroad.

Are you looking for training in a particular science communication skill that has not been mentioned here? Or would you like (personal) media training, for example for an upcoming interview or TV appearance? Please contact the [Science Communication Adviser at SCM](#) and we will look at the options.

5.3 More information about science communication

You will find more information on science communication on the staff members website, for example on participating in popular science events or what you can do if you have a publication. You will also find a selection of articles, compiled together with Young Academy Leiden, with useful tips and information for starting with [science communication](#).



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