

Dealing with the Media

Almost everybody gets almost all their information via the media. It is therefore vital, if you are to deliver your objectives, that your media relations are first class. Indeed, many parts of government are engaged in what amounts to a permanent campaign. There is also much truth in the saying that 'you should feed the media or else they will feed on you'. You should therefore make every effort to be proactive, open and honest with the media, who will often be grateful for a clear exposition of your objectives and activities.

But keep the following warnings in the front of your mind.

The first and overriding rule is that you must never ever talk to the media without first talking to your press office – who will generally talk to journalists themselves, unless you are senior and properly trained and prepared.

Second, remember that we are not accountable to the media – nor are Ministers, though you sometimes wouldn't think so from the way in which parts of the media sometimes behave. There is no difference in principle between talking to a reporter and talking to any other member of the public. You should therefore not give information to a reporter that you would not give both to any other reporter and to any other member of the public.

Third, journalists do not trust you. They may be very polite, and they may like you, but they know that you represent Ministers, and they trust Ministers even less. Anyway, very few civil servants are any good at giving succinct information to those unfamiliar with the subject matter. All reporters have therefore had some experience of receiving over-optimistic predictions and over-rosy judgements (because Ministers and officials have a natural desire to paint themselves and their decisions in the best possible light), and over-simple, false or misleading information (because of misunderstandings arising from rapid oral communication).

Fourth, many in the national media seem to be interested in little other than entertaining their readers, and will use you, or your Ministers, for that purpose if they possibly can. Therefore, unless your story is very straightforward and/or you are very experienced, aim at essentially factual media such as local press, trade journals, the *Financial Times*, and radio and TV programmes aimed at business audiences.

It follows (see rule one!) that you should make sure you have access to first class advice – particularly from your department's press office, but often also from outside experts. This is not the place to repeat all the advice that your press office will give you, but some of the basics are as follows.

Don't waste effort. Don't issue boring irrelevant press notices or seek media attention

for trivial stories. Do get a reputation for saying things that are worth listening to. If you need to put something on the record, use the web, or issue an information note, or maybe use a Written Ministerial Statement. Save press releases for genuinely interesting and newsworthy stories.

Keep the message simple – one main argument and a couple of supporting points. Press notices, for instance, should begin with the key points you want to get across:

- What is being planned, decided, opposed or supported?
- Why is it important?
- Where is it taking place?
- Who is doing it?
- When will it happen?
- How many people will it affect?
- How much will it cost?

If you can't distil 'the news' into a headline and one or two short supporting sentences, then don't bother with a press release. You should not use the media to communicate complex messages.

When you have worked out your message, make sure it is seen and understood by anyone who might come into contact with the media.

Make sure you have answers to all the questions that a journalist could sensibly ask. Key facts, and answers to all the most obvious questions, should go into any press notice. But you need to have a background 'Q & A' covering everything else for use by anyone who might possibly be asked about your subject. There is nothing worse than having different people giving different answers to the same question, and it's almost as bad if it appears, because of lack of preparation, that you have not thought about an important aspect of the issue.

You must never ever have any direct contact with the media unless (a) you are properly trained, (b) you are very experienced, (c) your press office have told you that they trust you and (c) the subject is neither novel nor contentious. Even then, a press officer will generally accompany you, or sit beside you when you are on the phone. If not, you must subsequently report what you have said.

If you are to be interviewed, here are some basic rules which you should follow:

P Clearly identify your role. Are you speaking as yourself (i.e. an expert on a particular issue) and only saying what you believe to be true and sensible? Or are you speaking on behalf of Ministers ('The Government believes' etc.). If the latter, consider yet again whether you should be doing the interview at all. You may not defend (as distinct from explain) government policies. Ministers should speak on their own behalf.

P Ensure that you can answer every conceivable question without prevarication.

P Prepare very carefully what you are going to say, keep it simple and do not stray beyond the area you have prepared.

P Try to 'answer and move on'. In other words, especially when being interviewed on the radio or TV, first answer the question but then add a comment or story which takes the interview in a direction which allows you to get your point across. You, not the interviewer, should be in control of what you say.

P Never knowingly lie or mislead.

P If you make a mistake, correct it as soon as possible.

Finally, when talking to a newspaper reporter, you should generally specify that you are talking 'for background'. He or she is not then supposed to indicate that they have been briefed by a civil servant. This is so that you can avoid upstaging your Ministers, and not because you are embarrassed by what you are doing or saying. (There is no point in asking to be 'off the record'. If you say anything interesting to a reporter, they are bound to report it – which is why you should never give to one reporter any information which you would not give to any member of the public.)