

When the journalist calls – a short guide to contact with the press for researchers in AGRO



AGRO lives by producing and disseminating knowledge. When communicating to the public via the press, AGRO's researchers act as experts not only as a source of facts but are sometimes also asked for comments, predictions or opinions. It is therefore important that you as a researcher have an easy and professional way of dealing with the media.

You can use this short guide to prepare yourself for meeting the media no matter whether it takes place physically or as a telephone interview, or if you participate in a radio or television interview.

It is important to realise that the journalist will cut a great deal in the interview and angle it to underpin the story that he or she aims to tell. Some sentences, that for you would seem to be taken out of context, can be the only ones that are included in a television news spot or a newspaper article. It is therefore important to be aware of the conditions for participating in an interview.

Make an agreement with the journalist

Prior to participating in an interview, you should make an oral agreement with the journalist in which you clarify the following:

What is the name of the journalist and which media does he or she come from?

What is the story, what is it about, what does the journalist want? Ask the journalist if he or she is looking for background information or if the intention is to get you to confirm existing facts or communicate from your area of expertise.

What is your role? Are you being asked as an expert, or are you being asked to have an opinion about a certain issue? If you are being asked to state your opinion then you should emphasise that it is your own personal opinion. Another possibility is refuse to give your opinion and just stick to the facts within your area of expertise. It is safest to stick to knowledge within your area of expertise.

What does the journalist want you to say something about? It will be easier for both you and the journalist if you prepare about the content of the interview beforehand. This can also ensure that the interview does not go off on a tangent.

Who will the journalist be speaking with otherwise? You cannot be sure that the journalist will give up all his or her sources, but you can gain an understanding of the context in which you are acting.

What will the journalist quote you as saying? Remember to ask for your quotes for approval. If you are in any doubt, then

ask to get the questions in writing and answer them in writing. Remember to agree on deadlines.

Can I ask to see what the journalist has written? In most cases the journalist will let you have a look at your own quotes but not the whole story. You can offer to proofread the article for factual errors. Remember to have a clear agreement about the timeframe for proofreading and/or approval.

Will the journalist bring up concrete cases or examples that you will be asked to comment on and, if so, which? Consider if the information you are being asked about is covered by confidentiality in connection with either the Administrative Act or a concrete contract. If you are in doubt then consult with your immediate superior or a lawyer.

The next step: Participate or not?

When the conditions are in place you have the following choices:

Participate: To participate in the interview under the agreed conditions. You must evaluate if what the journalist is asking about falls within your area of expertise or if there might be someone else at the university who is more of an expert in the area.

Refer: You can refer to a colleague or their immediate superior if you feel that he or she has a better background for answering. Contact the person in question before the media wants to contact them and share your impressions of the conversation about the conditions. In this way, you can help your colleague to gain an overview and make it easier to participate in the interview.

Participate in writing: You can participate on condition of answering in writing. This can give you time to think about the answers. Remember to agree on when the journalist will send his or her questions, when you need to send your answers, and when you might be able to read the story prior to its being published.

Refuse: You can choose to refuse to participate.

More to remember

Our correspondence with people outside of Aarhus University is basically covered by the rules about access to documents and more and more journalists record their conversations. You must therefore be clear about whether you are speaking on or off the record, i.e. for a quote or for background information.

You need to be aware that you are speaking on behalf of Aarhus University, e.g. as a researcher (expert), as someone responsible for a concrete policy support task, or as part of the management.

If your approach is to be accessible, friendly and obliging, and you view the interview as an opportunity to share your knowledge, then you have lots of possibilities for influencing the story – not least how much of your knowledge will come into play in the public eye.

Do you need a sparring partner?



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