

Report of the Working Group on the Relationship between the Media and the Academy Teaching, Research & International Policy Project

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Introduction

From November 7 to 9, 2019 the TRIP Project convened a working group at William & Mary to discuss the use of academic knowledge by journalists. The group included prominent journalists, scholars whose work seeks to bridge the theory-practice divide, and foundations and nonprofit staff who interact with the media. Our overall goals for the media project were to increase understanding of how the media perceives and represents academic ideas, data, and findings and increase engagement between academics and members of the media with the long term goal of increasing the policy influence of academic work. During the meeting, participants developed three sets of recommendations about how to increase media use of academic knowledge. We organize them here according to who should adopt these recommendations (scholars or members of the media) and, within those groups, at what level the recommendations should be adopted (by the individual scholars and journalists, by academic programs and media outlets, or at the level of institutional changes within the academy and the fourth estate).

How Scholars Can Help Bridge the Gap

Individual Scholars

Our first set of recommendations explores how individual scholars can produce content that appeals to members of the media and to interact with the media in ways that are likely to produce greater uptake of academic knowledge by journalists.

1. Attend Trainings: Organizations like *Bridging the Gap* and the Op-ed Project offer trainings for scholars who are interested in policy and/or media engagement.
2. Pay Attention to Timing: Journalists attending the workshop frequently reminded scholars to be mindful of the timing of their research. To successfully place op-eds and blog posts on their research and/or to ensure that members of the media quote or cite academic work, scholars should contact journalists well ahead of important planned events or anniversaries of important events in their field of research. By anticipating moments of heightened interest for their particular research areas, scholars can not only get their own research in the public eye, but can serve as a helpful resource to journalists seeking an edge in their coverage of a planned or recurring event. In general, media participants advised scholars to be deliberate when thinking of articles to pitch or when requesting that reporters to use academic data; this involves both planning ahead on the timing of releasing new findings, datasets, or research reports, and also making sure to create content that is accessible and interesting to the intended audience.
3. Provide Regular Research Updates: Publication schedules for academic research generally are tied to scholars' own schedules, rather than events in the real world, making it difficult for that

research to enter the news cycle. One reporter at the workshop recommended that academics release reports on academic research projects on a regular and predictable schedule. Consistently releasing information on an annual or quarterly basis--as the Afrobarometer, Failed State Index, and TRIP Rankings do--better informs members of the media when choosing which stories to cover and how. This recommendation is inspired by business journalism, in which the news cycle is determined by the release of quarterly earnings reports.

4. “Pitch to your cousin or mom”: Journalists advised that scholars seeking to disseminate their ideas and data via the media adopt a tone intended for a layperson. Scholars should write to inform members of the interested public who do not have the same degree of knowledge; do not write for other academics. For example, one attendee suggested writing to explain ideas and arguments to one’s family members. Several journalists reminded the academic participants that journalists’ job is to report on news stories. It is important for scholars to frame their work as newsworthy and relevant for the general public. Before pitching a story to the media, scholars might ask themselves, “Would this be interesting to my mother?”
5. Know your audience: When thinking about pitching a story or considering how to share their research with the media, scholars should have a good understanding of their audience and the outlet they are working with. While building these relationships, scholars should think about their intended audience and the value that their contributions will add to a story, and they should seek to align themselves with an outlet interested in their contributions and intended for the same audience.
6. Understand the rules of journalism: Workshop attendees repeatedly advised that scholars to learn the “rules” of journalism, particularly as they relate to deadlines and the rules of attribution.
 - a. *Deadlines*. Unlike many deadlines in the academy, journalists’ deadlines usually are hard and fast. Scholars need to learn and respect those deadlines to effectively communicate their arguments and data to members of the media.
 - b. *Rules of attribution*. Before academics say anything to a reporter, they should make sure that the journalist and the academic share a common understanding of the terms of the interview, the meaning of the following terms, and when and how they apply:
 - Off the record
 - On background
 - On the record
 - Not for attribution

The meanings of these terms may differ by person, and it is important that the reporter and the scholar both agree to the rules of attribution, the meaning of those rules or terms, and when they apply. It is particularly important that scholars understand that, if the scholar wishes to speak off the record, the reporter must agree before the scholar makes a statement. Most reporters will not allow the scholar to say something and then later declare it off the record or on background. Most reporters will also not share their draft stories before they are printed, but if scholars are concerned about being quoted accurately or in context, they should ask for this courtesy.

7. Interview well: The best way for scholars to communicate their ideas to journalists is through effective interviews. When being interviewed by a journalist, scholars should be prepared to concisely summarize their research and share their expertise as it relates to the interview

questions and the larger story at hand. Journalists who participated in the workshop warned scholars to be responsive to specific questions rather than providing long monologues on history or one's own academic research. "I'm not writing a history lesson," one journalist noted. "I want to report on the news of the day."

8. **Be willing to talk on background**: Often, journalists want to interview scholars primarily for background on a story. Media participants at the TRIP conference described scholars as a helpful resource thanks to their extensive knowledge, experience, and helpful connections in the field. Scholars should understand that talking on background with a journalist is not any less valuable than being directly quoted in a story; the process of building these engaged relationships is a marathon, not a sprint, and contributing to any reporting stage is valuable. If a scholar is valuable to a reporter on background, this increases the probability that the same reporter will use that scholar's research or quote that scholar in a future story.

Academic Programs

1. **Tip sheets**: Journalist's Resource at the Shorenstein Center at Harvard University produces tip sheets for journalists on how to read and use academic research. Participants at the workshop proposed adopting this model to produce tip sheets for academics on how to best communicate their research to members of the media. Attendees pointed out that journalists do not receive the same kind of academic training, so academics need to be taught how to distill important information. Ideally, such tip sheets also would include information on how to pitch stories effectively, as well as pointing out what is news-worthy about one's research.

Academic Structures and Incentives

1. **Tenure incentives and policies**: Workshop participants repeatedly noted the need to change, or increase the pace of change to, tenure and promotion policies that prioritize peer-reviewed scholarly articles and books at the expense of work intended for a wider, more public audience. These changes could be modelled after policy changes at schools like Johns Hopkins and Duke intended to further prioritize policy relevant research and work.
2. **Journal policies**: Workshop participants discussed the need for revised journal policies that speed the review process and encourage the publication of more policy-relevant research. Political science and international relations journals should also offer free subscriptions to members of the media.

How Journalists Can Help Bridge the Gap

Individual Journalists

1. **Consult academics**: Individual journalists can make a greater effort to consult academics and academic publications for background information or when links appear between scholarship and the journalists' reporting. Journalists also can work to make scholars part of the regular sources that they reference. As one journalist pointed out, benefits to consulting scholars include access to

further academic knowledge, references to other specialists in the field, and access to relevant papers and publications.

2. Reflect consensus: Journalists should seek to represent broad academic consensus accurately rather than seeking out specific quotes or data points to prove a point or devoting equal space to ideas that are not widely held in the academy. Some workshop participants pointed out that journalists often consult scholars to provide backup for their arguments; however, when seeking academic knowledge, journalists should be open to letting scholars teach them new things, which can inform future stories.
3. Question conventional wisdom: While journalists should seek to represent academic consensus, they also should make an effort to move beyond standard or traditional works in the field and push for access to the most up-to-date scholar work.
4. Build relationships: Just as scholars are encouraged to reach out to journalists, workshop participants encouraged journalists to reach out to academics and build and sustain relationships with scholars independent of any particular story. One journalist at the workshop reminded participants that not every conversation with a source necessarily needs to lead to a story. Building relationships and links with members of the academy can help provide background for stories and build a foundation for future interactions.
5. Be transparent: It is important for journalists to clearly define expectations when interacting with scholars and especially to clarify the rules for attribution. Adequately conveying the stakes of news reporting, what information the journalist would like to know, as well as other details, such as the possibility of direct quotations and timelines, can go a long way in making conversations with academics useful and productive.
6. Represent the diversity of your sources: One scholar noted the importance of being vigilant on the issue of representation. If journalists were to talk to a diverse array of scholars on background but choose only to cite the men, for example, consider the optics of that choice and the potential disparity in exposure for those scholars.

Media Outlets

1. Editorial flexibility: Editors should provide their journalists with the flexibility to dive into academic research whenever possible. Journalists are often constrained by their editors in terms of what stories they can cover and publish. Editors, in turn, are motivated by a desire to increase readership and revenue and to influence policymakers and the public.
2. Editorial creativity: Workshop participants encouraged editors to seek to explore new space and engage more directly with academic work. Future research could include surveys of or interviews with editors to gauge demand for academic knowledge and determine which outlets and editors are most interested in talking to scholars and publishing IR-related stories.

Media Structure and Incentives

1. Business models: Understanding evolving journalistic business models is key to understanding best practices for scholarly engagement with the media. Outlets that have moved beyond

click-based models of success allow greater space for conveying analyses and information, including academic ideas and data, to the public.

Third Party Opportunities

1. Academic blogs: Blogs that connect IR scholars to policy conversations are a significant cornerstone of academic engagement with practitioners. These sources also can be a space for journalists to engage with academic research and influence policy. One workshop participant noted that a major reason why Washington Post continues to host the Monkey Cage blog is because it is well known that policymakers read and are influenced by it. Spaces that are mutually beneficial for academics, journalists, editors, and practitioners are obvious outlets for engagement and should be nurtured.
2. Searchable abstracting services: In some academic fields, searchable abstracting services summarize the basics of new research and allow journalists and others to easily connect with scholars who conduct research relevant to their reporting. In the sciences, for example, Science Direct provides abstracts of books and articles to facilitate research by scholars, journalists, and others.
3. Databases of experts: In the sciences, SciLine maintains a database of academic experts who are amenable to speaking with the media. This database allows journalists to easily find previously vetted sources for reporting. Women Also Know Stuff is an example of a similar searchable database in political science, although there is room for such a system within IR.
4. Distribution platforms: Services like EurekAlert! connect journalists to the latest academic findings in the sciences. EurekAlert! describes itself as a ‘nonprofit news-release distribution platform.’ Services such as these allow journalists, as well as the wider public, to access academic research in a timely, condensed, and easily accessible manner. Workshop participants expressed a desire for a similar platform for IR.
5. Foundation support: Foundations such as the Carnegie Corporation of New York provide crucial support for academic engagement initiatives such as the Monkey Cage blog and the Bridging the Gap initiative at American University. These foundations can continue to support efforts that enable policy-relevant research and encourage academic-media engagement.
6. Associations and trainings: Professional associations like the American Political Science Association (APSA) and the International Studies Association (ISA) (for academics) and the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) (for journalists) can further develop programs designed to encourage media-academic engagement. These associations already host annual conferences that could serve as yearly opportunities for scholars to share research with the media and the public and increase awareness of media interest in academic work. APSA’s annual pre-conference workshops provide a model for the proposed trainings, which could address issues like how academics can better market their research and how journalists can more effectively read and use academic papers or interpret statistics.
7. Media participation in professional association meetings: APSA, ISA, and other academic professional associations should provide greater access to journalists to conference programs. This could be accomplished, in part, by providing free access to annual meetings to members of the media. Workshop participants also suggested establishing a “buddy system” for conferences

in which journalists covering political science and international relations conferences could be paired with academics who can help them track down the most interesting or helpful research based on their “buddy” journalist’s reporting interests.