

“HarveyLeach”

**Journalists**  
and the  
**media**

# About the authors



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Andrew has spent the last 30 years presenting the main TV news programmes on BBC and ITN. He is one of the very few presenters to have fronted all the BBC's daily news programmes.

For ITN he was the lead presenter, fronting live coverage of stories ranging from the London terrorist attacks in July 2005 to the Queen Mother's funeral.

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He spent 17 years travelling the world as a BBC foreign correspondent with postings in Bonn, Beirut, Johannesburg and Brussels.

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# Journalists and the media

Journalists come in different shapes and sizes:

## **The young hopeful**

May be pushy, aggressive, but also inexperienced, and their questions may be ill-informed, perhaps ill-considered. They're anxious, though, to make their mark – and will often press you further than you want to go.

## **The innocent**

Very dangerous...liable to come to you looking for help, pleading ignorance and at the same the time getting under your guard and lulling you into indiscretion.

# Journalists and the media

## The famous face/voice

Don't be intimidated. They don't have anything to prove and providing you deliver the goods, they'll treat you fairly. But they can spot a weakness at a hundred paces.

## The seen-it-all hack

Appears laid-back, even lazy. Easily bored – but has a razor-sharp news sense and comes awake the moment you deliver anything controversial, outspoken or just plain headline-worthy.

All of them have one thing in common. They want a headline or a soundbite.

*Treat them all with respect, but caution.*



# Journalists and the media

Never let it be said (though many would) that journalists don't have any original thoughts. However, the best journalists are those who enlist experts to help them create their story.

That is where you come in. Your specialist knowledge – whether you are an economist, a meteorologist, or simply an eyewitness to an event – is vital to the journalist.

Journalists know a little about a lot, but rarely enough on any one subject to write or broadcast an authoritative piece without specialist input.

# Journalists and the media

Whatever your particular area of expertise, they are relying on you to give them the information they need. It's therefore very important that you deliver this information in a coherent, clear fashion. If you fail to do so, the journalist may come away from the interview with the wrong facts – and if you are being directly quoted, that could be personally damaging.

You may be asked for straightforward facts. That's relatively easy; either you know the answers or you don't. In the case of an event you have witnessed, your role will often be very similar to a reporter on the scene. What happened? What did you see? What did you do?

# Journalists and the media

It becomes more difficult and potentially more risky when you are asked for your professional opinion. If you're confident about your viewpoint, no problem. But if, for example, it's a particularly controversial issue, don't forget that your views will be stored on the internet or enshrined in a cuttings file somewhere and could come back to haunt you.

Just remember, if you can help a journalist explain or clarify a complex subject, you are performing a very important role.

The rest of us – as readers, listeners or viewers – depend on your knowledge.



# Journalists and the media

There's an easy way to pre-empt some of the questions that a journalist will put to you, either in an on-the-phone or face-to-face interview.

Just remember the 5 Ws:

- What
- Where
- When
- Why
- Who

Most questions for most interviews will fall into one of the above categories.

Knowing this should give a spokesperson a head-start in an interview.

# Journalists and the media

The first three on the list – What, Where and When – should be easy for you.

Don't even think about giving an interview to a journalist unless you've got the basic facts and figures of the story well-marshalled in your head.

Why and Who can be trickier. Handling questions in these areas requires having your antenna finely-tuned as to where the journalist might go as they pursue their story.

The Why factor can take an interviewee down all sorts of roads where they would prefer not to tread. Prepare for questions about 'blame' and 'guarantees' the same thing won't happen again if, for example, your company has been responsible for death or injury or has suffered some other dire setback.

# Journalists and the media

The Who factor requires a spokesperson to be aware of all those who could be affected by the news story that is the subject of the interview.

Let's say your company has been responsible for a major environmental disaster.

The 'Who' list of those affected could be pretty long – the local population, the rescue services, your shareholders, your staff, local MPs, the local council, watchdog bodies, safety organisations etc.

Make sure you think through all of these before doing the interview.

# Journalists and the media

Finally, journalists are very skilled at pacing an interview, particularly newspaper reporters. They can spend 25 minutes softening you up with a range of non-controversial, easy-to-handle, seemingly innocuous questions. So much so that you begin to wonder whether the journalist is part of your organisation's PR team.

Notwithstanding the fact that you've just announced a major product recall having killed 50 people, the journalist seems so pleasant and helpful.

Watch out. He or she has gained your confidence, won you round. They'll keep the killer question or two until the very end, when you are off your guard and have mentally started winding down. That's when you're most vulnerable.



# Journalists and the media

There is a world of difference between a trick question – and a tricky one. Any interviewee in these media-savvy days who is asked to name the day on which his wife-beating sessions stopped should be able to spot the danger easily enough.

Much more difficult is the line of questioning which leads to a “trick” question.

*“So you say the local council is wrong?”*

*“Yes...”*

*“But they say the facts support their view. So who is telling the truth?”*

*“Well, I believe my views are correct.”*

*“So they are lying?”*

*“I didn’t say...”*

*“But you say you are telling the truth. So they must be lying?”*

# Journalists and the media

Under pressure, at speed, it is not easy to manage such an exchange with equilibrium and authority. What you must do is return to the issues which gave rise to the interview in the first place – “I can’t speak for the council, I don’t know how they reached their conclusions. All I know is that...”

Another favourite among inquisitors in the “can you guarantee?” question. As in – “Can you guarantee that the same sort of accident will not happen again in your factory?”

Of course you can’t, and any reasonable person will recognise that. But to say that you cannot guarantee that a similar event will never occur again sounds weak, an admission of failure or lack of due care.

# Journalists and the media

Your reply must be brave and confident, ranging from the general – “Nothing in life can be guaranteed, as you well know” – to the more specific – “We could never absolutely guarantee that, and nor could anybody in our line of business, but in the light of what has happened we believe we have put every possible safeguard in place...”

It is at this point that all media-handling advice, including how to counter trick questions, returns to the same fundamental rule – prepare very thoroughly. That preparation must include the relevant, positive points you want to make. These points should address both the issues you believe are important, and those likely to be raised by the interviewer.

# Journalists and the media

Another much-neglected piece of advice is, take control of the early exchanges, in particular your first reply. If in that opening answer you can set out your case and give your version of events, you will stand a good chance of pre-empting some of the tricky questions. This also allows you to repeat key messages – “As I said a little earlier...”

Most interviewers would quibble at the idea that they use trick questions. They are after all “just seeking the truth” and are rewarded handsomely for doing it in a convincing and persuasive manner. If you, however, manage to express your viewpoint with authority and clarity, the public will be in a position to make up their own minds.

In the end, that is what matters.



# Journalists and the media

As the great Sir Francis Bacon so astutely put it – in between writing Macbeth and King Lear – “ipsa scientia potestas est”. Roughly translated, “knowledge is power”.

In the current media world, knowledge not only gives you power, it also makes you valuable to journalists. Without drawing on others’ knowledge, they very often would not have a story to write. They need the expert knowledge you have about your own industry, your company or your specialism.

# Journalists and the media

But why should you share such hard-won knowledge?

First of all, from a purely altruistic point of view, if you don't share it, what's the point in having it?

Secondly, spreading and sharing your knowledge through a journalist will raise your profile and the profile of your organisation.

Few of us realise how much expert knowledge we carry with us. Be confident that others would find that expertise useful, even valuable.

# Journalists and the media

There are now many ways of displaying your expertise. Social media offers opportunities through blogs, Facebook and Twitter. Specialist publications and the trade press are hungry for authoritative copy. Journalists and other writers will then find their way to you, particularly if you have something new to say about your area of expertise.

So don't hide your light under a bushel.

Or, if you fancy an extra slice of Bacon –  
“Silence is the virtue of fools”.



# Journalists and the media

One of the first ways to establish contact with the media is, of course, the press release about a news story for which you'd like some publicity. Many press releases are appallingly written, with the real news buried in paragraph 19, preceded by a lot of organisational mumbo-jumbo.

Write a sharp, snappy press release, therefore, much in the style that the journalist will themselves use. You're likely to make better media contacts if journalists feel you are a kindred spirit i.e. coming at news stories in the same way they are.

# Journalists and the media

Contacts with journalists can, of course, extend beyond the press release, the telephone call or the news conference on the day when you are announcing some news. Maintaining contact between times is important too.

Background briefings are a profitable way of staying in touch with journalists. The problem is, however, that journalists have less and less time to attend such occasions. In the days when TV reporters had only one or two news bulletins per day to worry about and newspaper journalist didn't have to bother with social media, blogging and website content, then there was time for them to turn up for an informal chit-chat with a company's bosses or a getting-to-know you session with the new CEO, possibly over a glass of Sauvignon Blanc.

# Journalists and the media

In the era of 24-hour news, Twitter and diminished newsroom resources, those days are pretty much over. Rarely will a news editor spare one of his journalists to swan off on a jolly for two or three hours just for the sake of ‘media contacts’. More often than not, they’ve got to come back with a story.

So, even though you might wish to hold an informal get-together with journalists in order to enhance your media relations, make sure they leave with a decent news story. If you don’t, they might not return a second time.

The surest way of developing media contacts, however, is to give journalists what they want in the way that they want it.

# Journalists and the media

Handle a newspaper reporter's inquiry in a professional and timely way and they will come back to you. You will go straight into their contacts book and the next time a story breaks in your area, it's you they will phone up rather than the spokesperson from a rival organisation.

Do a TV or radio interview in the way the programme wants it and the same thing happens. You're the first person they will call up the next time a similar news story breaks.

That's why you often see the same old faces on television. Journalists trust them to do the business – and that's the best form of media contact you can have.

# **Request a tailored media training programme and quotation**

If you are interested in the most effective media training for your spokespeople, [request a training programme and quotation](#) based on your requirements.