

# Step Up to the Mic

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If knowledge is power, then psychological scientists have enormous untapped power to change the world. Psychologists study something of interest to everyone on the planet — namely, people. We try to understand why people behave as they do and how we can encourage them to change their behavior to improve their well-being. The knowledge psychological scientists gain has direct relevance to the daily lives of individuals, families, and communities around the world.

As things stand now, the power of our knowledge is largely unrealized. Our knowledge is typically only shared with the world outside the ivory tower when a journalist or blogger stumbles upon it or when the researcher (or, more typically, the publisher) makes an effort to publicize the work. Academics are often uncomfortable with both scenarios, the end result being that our knowledge is only shared with other academics and never gets out to the other 99% of our society.

I have spent the last decade talking with the media and policymakers about my own and others' research on a topic that draws its share of controversy: spanking children. I have repeatedly found that the more children are spanked, the more behavioral, social, and emotional problems they have in the future, even when their initial behavior is controlled. Because these findings go against common wisdom, not everyone is open to hearing about them. I have learned a few things about research dissemination along the way, and below will identify reasons why we as scientists do not talk with the media and policymakers, why we should talk with them, and how we can talk with them.

## Why Don't We?

I think the reason we don't communicate more fluently with the media and policymakers comes down to two key aspects of our academic backgrounds. First is our scientific training. We trust data above all else, including above our own strongly held theories or opinions, and we put our ultimate trust in the

results of experiments. We consider alternative explanations for our results, discuss the limitations of our data, and make clear that, outside of an experiment, we can never really “prove” our theory about human behavior to be true. We are trained to never draw conclusions beyond what the data can tell us.

While admirable from a scientific point of view, our adherence to data and the conservative nature of our conclusions present an obstacle when we communicate with journalists or policymakers. Journalists want sound bites and relatively simple stories. They are not interested in qualifications such as “only under these conditions” or “only with this population.” For psychological scientists, equivocation about results reflects our modesty about what we have found and what we can conclude; for the journalists who want a story and the policymakers who want an answer, such equivocation is unhelpful at best and annoying at worst.

Our second obstacle to sharing our research is our ignorance about how to translate our findings into a format intelligible to nonacademics. In our professional lives, we are rewarded for writing with rampant jargon, making our published articles virtually unintelligible to anyone who does not have the secret decoding ability bestowed by several years in a doctoral program. We are not trained to distill findings down to their essence in a way that is digestible to nonresearchers but still true to the research. This is a hard balance to strike, but when done well it can be incredibly effective and rewarding.

## **Why Should We?**

Given that communicating research is beyond our training and instincts as psychologists, why should we make the effort to talk with the public or policymakers? There are three key reasons:

**“It” will happen with or without you.** Whether “it” is a news article or a piece of legislation, the public will talk, the journalists will write, and the policymakers will legislate about the topic whether or not you join the conversation. If you decide not to become involved, you risk having the debate influenced by less-informed individuals who may cherry-pick research that fits their argument. It is worth considering, “If I don’t talk with them, who will?”

**We have an obligation to share what we know.** I would argue that we as social scientists have a moral obligation to share our knowledge with the public. But whether or not you agree with this moral obligation, many of us also have an ethical obligation to do so. If we have received funding from federal (i.e., taxpayer-funded) agencies, we have an obligation to let taxpayers know what we did and found with their money. There is a similar obligation if we teach at publicly funded universities.

**We can inform the two major conduits for large-scale social change.** These two conduits are public opinion and public policies and programs. When journalists or policymakers come to us, they legitimately want the power that is locked in the knowledge we, as experts, have. By the time policymakers have reached out to researchers, they already have a sense of the social problem and a commitment to doing something about it. If we do not share what we know about that social problem, policy decisions can be heavily influenced by opinion and personal experience. It is crucial that we accept invitations to inject science into the debate; if we keep saying no, they will stop asking, and psychological science will be left out of the policymaking process.

## How Can We?

Once we are willing to share our knowledge with journalists and policymakers, how do we go about doing so?

**Getting our research “out there.”** Research reaches journalists and policymakers mainly through publicity, which can come from two main sources. First is the publisher of the journal article or book. Publishers typically have a procedure for developing press releases and disseminating them to media contacts. Some journals now even require lay abstracts to accompany journal articles, and these are easily transformed into press releases. The second source of publicity is your own university’s public relations office. They too can create press releases and disseminate your findings to the media.

One other way to publicize your work is to capitalize on a current news story. If journalists do not find their way to you, and your publicity efforts have not paid off, you can take your message to the public directly by writing op-eds or letters to the editor for major national or local newspapers. That said, top newspapers’ (e.g., *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*) op-ed pages are typically filled by invitation only, but you can always try to submit something to them. Writing op-eds requires its own skill set, and thus it is important to seek advice from others who have done it successfully.

**Talking with the media.** In our media-rich world, a multitude of media sources play a role in disseminating research. There are not only journalists at print newspapers and newsmagazines but also their online counterparts, who often write distinct content. There are television and radio journalists, but there are also podcasters and bloggers. No matter their outlet, these media purveyors vary in their understanding of and trust in research and in their willingness to tell a story consistent with the research.

It is always a good idea to vet people who contact you and the organizations they represent: Is it a legitimate news organization? Will the journalist have an ax to grind? During periods of high interest in my research, I have used my university public relations office to help me screen interviews that were likely to be confrontational (e.g., AM radio talk shows with socially conservative hosts). It is also ideal if you can get questions ahead of time or at least get the spin of the article. I also ask whom else the journalists have spoken with, as this lets me know what they may have heard already and helps me prepare for counterarguments I should address in my own comments.

**Communicating with policymakers.** In truth, this means communicating with the staffers of policymakers. Staffers are always working on short timelines and need whatever you can send them right away. They will ask for a short, digestible summary of your research, or the general findings of the field, on a topic. The emphasis is on content that is brief (i.e., two pages or less) and comprehensible. You may be asked to write a policy brief, which is a summary of a social issue, what research tells us about it, and what policy implications can be drawn. You may also be asked to testify to a legislative body. As with writing an op-ed, this is a specialized skill, and I would recommend seeking advice from others who have done it before taking the plunge yourself.

## Conclusion

Talking with the media or policymakers can be frustrating and time-consuming. It also has very little payoff in the academic world, as researchers are not typically acknowledged, let alone rewarded, for talking with the media (although this is changing, in my experience). That said, it can be quite exciting and gratifying to see your research cited in top newspapers and on TV and radio or discussed in the halls of Congress or a state legislature. So much of the research and writing we do is a solitary effort we undertake in the hope that other researchers will find and cite our research. Talking with the media and policymakers is a way to ensure that our work does not languish in the journals, but rather finds its way to the court of public opinion and thereby realizes some of its power. æ

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