

Media Guide for Researchers

Leiden University, 2021



**Universiteit
Leiden**
The Netherlands

Discover the world at Leiden University

Contents

1. Researchers in the media	3
2. When do you appear in the media?	4
2.1 When the University publishes a news report and/or issues a press release in consultation with you	5
2.2 When a journalist contacts you in response to a current development	5
3. Before, during and after an interview	7
3.1 Practical aspects to consider before an interview	9
3.2 During the interview	12
3.3 After the interview	14
4. How to deal with criticism on social and other media	15
5. Contact and more information	17



1. Researchers in the media

Researchers are sought after guests in the media. They are often invited to appear on radio and TV programmes or give interviews for newspaper articles, they take part in debates in podcasts and online features, and they show journalists with cameras and sound teams around their labs. Leiden University really appreciates your making the effort and taking the time to share your work with a wider audience. We stimulate media contributions and employ people who can help you navigate media appearances. But ultimately, as a researcher, you are the one who has to tell your story. To make this process easier, we have created this media guide with practical tips to help you with media appearances.

“ Science communication is essential in demonstrating the impact of our research, and showing society what we do as a University and why our work is valuable for everyone. ”

Professor Hester Bijl, Rector Magnificus of Leiden University

2. When do you appear in the media?

There are a number of situations in which journalists may contact you. These situations each have their own dynamic.

A journalist may contact you in response to your own research results, for example because the University has published a news report on its website or issued a press release in consultation with you.

In such cases, the initiative rests with you as researcher. You have some news which you would like to bring to the media's attention. A press release has been published and you are aware of its content. It is about your own research, and you are perfectly capable of preparing for any questions.

In other cases, contact with journalists may arise more unexpectedly. For example, if a journalist seeks your expert opinion on a current development. This is not always something you are ready for. You may not have the time, or sufficient knowledge about the topic in question; you may not know exactly why the journalist has chosen you of all people, or the request may simply come at an inconvenient time.

This guide covers these two situations in greater detail. It contains practical tips on what to expect before, during and after an interview, how you can prepare, also in the case of an unexpected interview request, and other things you can do to make your media appearance a success.

A third possibility is that a journalist contacts you in response to your own personal activity on social media, for example on Twitter or your personal blog. Social media have dynamics of their own. For more information about this, please consult the Leiden University [social media code](#).

2.1 When the University publishes a news report and/or issues a press release in consultation with you

If you have published some research results that may be interesting for the media, the University is more than willing to help you bring this to their attention. If this is the case, please contact the University's [science communication adviser \(SC&M\)](#), or your [faculty communications department](#) to discuss the options for publicising your results. They can help you formulate a news report and/or decide whether your research should be actively brought to the media's attention in the form of a press release.

Some things to consider in this situation:

- A press release can be seen as an invitation to journalists to contact you to ask questions about your research. You should therefore make sure that you are easy to reach by telephone or email for up to one week after the news is announced.
- Be prepared. Think beforehand of any questions that journalists might ask, find out more about your audience, and if needed prepare a few points you would like to emphasise. See also Chapter 3 on how to prepare for an interview and tips to help you during the interview and afterwards.

2.2 If a journalist calls you to discuss a current development

There may be all sorts of reasons why a journalist would want to speak to a researcher. They may be looking for an expert to explain a current event or development. In that case, they will usually quote you in a newspaper or magazine, or on a website. A journalist may also be looking for background information on a given topic, without necessarily wanting to publish this information. In that case, your interview will be part of the journalist's research (often in preparation for a publication). If a journalist calls you on behalf of a radio or TV programme, they are usually looking for someone for a studio interview.

A phone call from a journalist often comes unexpectedly, which might mean that you do not have factual and nuanced answers ready. Don't hesitate to ask the journalist for some more background information: What is this about exactly? What does the journalist want from you? And why have they chosen to contact you? Think not only from the perspective of the questions being asked, but also from the perspective of what you have to offer. Journalists will usually appreciate your thinking along.

Some things to consider in this situation:

- It is perfectly normal to tell a journalist that you need some time to think about the questions, so don't hesitate to do so. If you ask for more time, communicate clearly when you will call them back.
- A journalist may contact you about a topic that is further removed from your area of expertise, or that may better match the expertise of one of your colleagues. In that case, it is a good idea to refer the journalist to the colleague in question or to a University press officer/spokesperson.
- If you are invited for an interview (in the studio or elsewhere), make sure you read the tips in Chapter 3.
- Journalists often work with tight deadlines, so don't be surprised if a journalist calls you for an interview that is due to appear in the newspaper the next day, or online or on the radio that very same day. Sometimes, you will have more time. Specialised science journalists usually have more generous deadlines, for example when writing for a weekend supplement or a monthly.
- For a radio or TV programme, the editor will always want a preliminary interview, usually at short notice. This kind of interview often involves exploring a topic (and your vision on it) in more depth, but the editor will also be assessing your level of expertise, your self-confidence and your skills as a speaker. It may happen that a preliminary interview leads to the decision not to invite you into the studio. Or a planned interview may get cancelled or rescheduled because of more urgent news.



3. Before, during and after an interview

If you are invited for an interview for an article or a radio or TV programme, you should carefully weigh the pros and cons of this kind of media appearance.

A media appearance is a good way of disseminating your insights more broadly, involving society in your work, or offering accountability for research that is often funded with public funds. It allows you to demonstrate the value of science in addressing societal issues and challenges.

Media appearances are also a good way to increase your own and/or your institute's or University's fame and reputation. It is also a useful exercise in talking about your research to non-experts, and many researchers really enjoy it. But remember that you are in charge, so don't do anything that does not feel right to you.

If you are reluctant to enter into dialogue with the media, if you don't have the time for it, or if you feel you are not ready, communicate this clearly. In case of doubt, you can always consult your colleagues, or your faculty's or the University's [science communication adviser](#). These are also the people to contact if you need extra media training or if you would like to practise for your interview.



“ Our goal is to create an open knowledge society. As researchers, we can contribute to this by feeding and enriching the public debate with our research results, but also by explaining how science works. Debate and uncertainty are an inherent part of that. ”

Ineke Sluiter, Professor of Greek Language and Literature at Leiden University and President of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW)



3.1 Practical aspects to consider before an interview

There are some things you can always do in preparation for an interview, irrespective of the medium (newspaper, TV, radio, etc.):

- Ask for the name of the journalist/editor and their contact details.
- Ask for the name of the programme, newspaper, magazine or website, and which section your interview will appear in. Do you know this publication? If not, find out more about it. Who are their target audience? How big is their reach? Ask for a link to a broadcast or website, or a PDF of the latest issue.
- Ask the journalist questions about the context, the background and their chosen perspective: What does the journalist want from you exactly, and why?
- Ask to preview the article or item before it is published (if possible), so you can correct any factual inaccuracies or poorly contextualised quotes.
- Make it clear what you have to offer, apart from answers to the questions. Most journalists appreciate hearing your expert opinion and input, and this can help you steer the conversation. You may be able to say a lot more about a topic if the journalist reformulates their question slightly.
- Ask the journalist whether they need any information beforehand, such as a recent academic paper, so they can read up about the topic.
- Ask who else will be mentioned in the article or item. Especially in the case of a radio show, it is good to know who will be joining you at the table. Consider whether you feel comfortable sharing the stage with this person or persons.
- Ask about the time line. When is the journalist supposed to deliver the item or article?
- Ask about the length of the article or item and ask how big your contribution will be: just a few short quotes or an extensive interview?

For radio and TV interviews, whether recorded or live, there are some specific things you may want to ask about beforehand:

- Ask the radio or TV programme who will be conducting the interview. This is usually not the editor who contacts you. You can Google the interviewer beforehand or look them up in preparation.
- Ask the radio or TV programme whether the interview will be recorded or broadcast live.

- Ask whether you can view the questions beforehand (or in any case the first question), so you can prepare and not be taken by surprise. This is especially important for radio and TV shows. In case of a TV interview, ask whether you can preview the ‘instarts’ (short videos inserted throughout the item). This is usually possible shortly before the broadcast, and it will help you prepare for what you will have to respond to.
- For live interviews, make sure you know beforehand how much speaking time you will have. This can help you choose what to say or not say.

Make agreements and negotiate

This may seem stressful or uncomfortable, but with most journalists you can reach good agreements or even negotiate the conditions for your participation. Journalists are used to this kind of negotiation, and the media world tends to function on a quid pro quo basis.

An important agreement to make beforehand is whether you will be able to preview the article or item before publication (this is obviously not possible in the case of live interviews). This is quite common practice in the Dutch media: many journalists even find it helpful, especially when they are writing about a complex topic. Check the text for any factual inaccuracies or wrongly contextualised quotes, but don't try to rewrite the entire article, as this will not be appreciated. Be constructive, respect the journalist's independence and only point to things that in your opinion are clearly wrong.

It is not common practice in the Netherlands to ask for a financial reward for an interview with a journalist. Journalistic contributions fall under freedom of information and free exchange of information. Expenses, such as travel expenses to and from the studio, may be reimbursed. In some cases, however, you can ask for a financial compensation, for example if you are asked to write an entire article. This depends on a number of things: the type of contribution, how much work is expected from you, in what medium your contribution will appear, etc.

You can make other agreements with journalists, or negotiate a number of aspects. If you want to set conditions or make agreements, make sure you

do so before the start of the interview so that everything is clear beforehand. Journalists are less likely to agree to requests made after the fact. Aspects you may want to consider include the following:

- **Exclusivity.** Sometimes a journalist will only want to have your story if you grant them exclusivity. This means that until the item is broadcast or published you will not be allowed to talk to other media. This may not be a bad thing, especially if it means you will be given a lot more time/space or if the medium in question has a wide national or international reach. If you do make such an agreement, make sure you respect it.
- **Embargo.** Be clear about embargos on research results or agreements with your employer/financer. Journalists are used to working with embargos and they usually respect them. Explain clearly the reason for the embargo, for example an inaugural lecture that has to take place first, or an as yet unpublished article in an academic journal.
- **How you are referred to.** Discuss with the journalist how you wish to be referred to – name, title, position, field, university. Indicate beforehand your preferences in this respect.
- **Speaking ‘off the record’.** Sometimes you may be willing to share your knowledge, but without being quoted. Make this clear beforehand to the journalist, and make sure they agree before you proceed with the interview. Make sure that the information cannot be traced back to you in other ways, and be aware of the fact that it is common practice in the academic world to discuss matters openly.

More advanced options

You can also set other conditions for taking part in an interview. Think, for example, of a minimum amount of speaking time, or the guarantee that a specific topic will or will not be discussed in the interview. Or you may want the journalist to mention that you have recently published a book on the topic in question. You can also agree that you will be allowed to publish the article/ interview on your own website.

Note: Negotiating opens news opportunities, but please be careful. Remember that journalists will always protect their independence and they may not always be willing or able to meet your conditions.



3.2 During the interview

As a rule, you can assume that you and the journalist have the same goal: creating a good article or item together. But you should also be aware that the interviewer, like any other interlocutor, will use techniques to try and seduce you into a response. These include silent pauses, or asking the same question in a different way. This can happen both in studio interviews and in telephone interviews for newspapers.

You should therefore remember to always remain sharp during an interview. Silence is not a problem; you don't have to fill it if you feel you have said enough.

If you want to find out more about this, or practise a bit because you expect to appear in the media shortly, contact your [faculty communications department](#) or the [science communication adviser](#) to find out about media training options.

General tips during the interview

- Always keep in mind the medium and the target audience. Is it a general or a specific audience? Are the target audience children or intellectual readers of *NRC Handelsblad*? Tune in to your audience, and adjust the way you tell your story accordingly. Clearly an interview for the *Jeugdjournaal* is very different from an interview for *Het Financieele Dagblad*. Don't hesitate to adapt your style accordingly.
- Make sure you are clear about the core of your story. What is your main message and what should the reader/viewer/listener really know in order to understand it? Repeat this message on a regular basis.
- Use lively and concrete examples to support your research results. When discussing abstract topics, metaphors and comparisons can also come in useful. Ask for example whether you can use objects during a studio interview.
- Answer as directly as possible. Don't start with a long academic prelude. Go straight to the point you want to make and then take some time to explain it in more detail.
- Don't be too formal when talking about your own research, and show your passion for your work. You may want to prepare a personal anecdote to share.

- Journalists may ask you private questions in response to your research topic. For example, whether you have ever taken drugs yourself if you study addiction, what party you vote for if you are a political science expert, or how often you fly if your research focuses on sustainability. This personal aspect is often important for journalists who work for children's programmes or other general audience programmes. They want to help their target audience identify with the researcher. If you don't want to answer, think of a light or humorous way of avoiding such questions.
- Be honest if there is something you don't know. For example, because you didn't study it, or because you don't find it suitable in the context of the interview. Don't hesitate to say: 'This goes beyond my field of expertise', 'You would have to ask someone else about it', or 'This is not a question for a scientist (but for a politician, diplomat, etc.).'
- When on TV, ignore the camera and make eye contact with the interviewer and other guests.
- When on the radio or on TV, don't talk too fast and don't interrupt.
- When on TV, be aware of your body language: don't gesticulate too much (also not with your hands). This distracts viewers from your message.
- Make sure you notice when a journalist asks a leading question or gives an oversimplified summary of your nuanced story. 'So what you're actually saying is...'. Answer with 'What I'm saying is...' or 'The most important point is...'



- Re-direct the conversation if the interviewer deviates too much from the topic (your story). Create a bridge in an answer ('This reminds me of...') or literally ask attention for something: 'Is it all right if I also talk a bit about ...?'
- Don't allow yourself to be provoked by other guests. Don't get angry. Remain professional, and stay close to your own area of expertise.

3.3 After the interview

- After you've given an interview and checked the resulting article for inaccuracies, it may still happen that the final article is not as you expected. The heading and introduction are usually written by a chief editor and not by the journalist you spoke to. Unfortunately, you have little influence over this process, but it is good to be aware of it.
- Inform the University or your faculty communications department that you contributed to an item, including when it will be published or broadcast. Your faculty communications department can help you generate more attention for the item.
- Sometimes an article or media appearance leads to other media also wanting to write about your research. This so-called flywheel effect can generate a lot of additional publicity. You may be approached by other journalists, or journalists may simply take over each other's information. This dynamic may jeopardise the accuracy and nuance of the original message. Keep this in mind, and if you disagree with what is reported, contact the relevant media, even if you did not speak to them before.
- Keep the contact details of any journalists you have spoken to or who have shown interest in your research. You can always at a later stage take the initiative to contact them if you have something new to report. This is common practice, and journalists appreciate being personally informed of new developments.
- At the end, make up the balance for yourself. What did you learn from your media appearance? Did you enjoy it? What went well, and what would you do differently next time?



4. How to deal with criticism on social and other media

A lot of the research conducted at Leiden University is concerned with societal topics. Be aware of the fact that some of these topics are highly sensitive and may attract criticism. The rise of internet sources and social media has also given rise to the concept of ‘alternative facts’ and the idea that ‘science is just an opinion.’ In addition, people don’t always respect general standards of decency on social media. How do you deal with criticism in the media, or with personal attacks or even intimidation on social media?

Criticism in or during a media appearance

During an interview about your research, the interviewer can of course ask you critical questions. You can usually prepare for these questions beforehand (see tips in Chapter 3).

However, some media – in particular daily talk shows – enjoy having a researcher debate with a ‘critic’. This creates a ‘polemic’ in which ‘both sides are given a voice’. The idea is that the audience can make up their own mind. However, this critic is not always a researcher, and is quite often far more direct, personal and unnuanced than what you may be used to from your colleagues. You should therefore always ask who will be sitting at the table with you and decide whether you are willing to enter into a dialogue with them. Ask yourself whether you will have enough space to highlight your message. Base your decision not only on the information you receive from the editor but also on your own gut feeling. Does it feel right to talk about this particular topic in this setting?

In case of doubt, ask for advice from more experienced colleagues or your faculty communications department, the science communication adviser or the University spokesperson. A few general tips in such situations:

- On the Internet, one can find ‘proof’ for any dubious claim or conspiracy theory, often by shopping selectively in academic publications or

exaggerating scientific uncertainties. Visit websites run by ‘opponents’ and become acquainted with the arguments they use.

- Emotions and feelings play an important role in many issues. Researchers like to focus on facts and averages, but individual experiences can vary greatly. Show understanding for this fact. ‘I understand that this is how you experience it, but this is not the case for most people.’
- Make a distinction between your role as an expert and your personal opinion. Emotion can sometimes only be answered with emotion. Think of suitable examples you might mention.

Criticism on social media

A free and open academic debate is crucial for the development of knowledge and the progress of science. Social media offer a platform for sharing knowledge and entering into dialogue with people in an accessible setting. Unfortunately, if you become active on social media, you can get some very strong reactions. Always set a good example and communicate openly. Say what you want to say, but focus on facts, rely on your subject expertise, take a nuanced approach, and refrain from unnecessary provocation. Abusive and/or threatening language are unacceptable, as are exclusion and discrimination. For more information about social media and the advantages and disadvantages for researchers, see the Leiden University [social media code](#).

If you receive a threat

If you are the target of threats and/or sustained abusive posts on social media, please contact the [Security Affairs department](#) of the Administration and Central Services. It goes without saying that the University will do everything in its power to help you.



5. Contact and more information

For help and support in your contact with the media, you can contact your faculty communications department or the science communication adviser at the Strategic Communication Directorate (SC&M). These are also the people to contact if you wish to bring news about your research to the media's attention.

- **Science communication adviser (SC&M)**

Marieke Epping: m.epping@bb.leidenuniv.nl | 071 527 15221

- **Faculty of Archaeology**

Marten Jesse Pot: m.j.pot@arch.leidenuniv.nl | 071 527 2685

- **Faculty of Humanities**

Joost van der Sluijs: j.van.der.sluijs@hum.leidenuniv.nl | 071 527 8591

- **Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs**

Judith van Doorn: j.e.van.doorn@fgga.leidenuniv.nl | 070 800 993

- **Faculty of Law**

Floris van der Driesche: f.van.den.driesche@law.leidenuniv.nl | 071 527 5256

- **Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences**

Rick Henneveld: r.m.henneveld@fsw.leidenuniv.nl | 071 527 3395

- **Faculty of Science**

news@science.leidenuniv.nl

- **Leiden University Medical Center/Faculty of Medicine**

pers@lumc.nl

In case of a threat

If you are the target of threats and/or sustained abusive posts on social media, please contact the Security Affairs department:

Leo Harskamp: l.j.t.harskamp@bb.leidenuniv.nl | 071 527 1191

Jaap van Zaanen: j.van.zaanen@bb.leidenuniv.nl | 071 527 3802

More information about science communication

The Young Academy Leiden has compiled a number of [useful tips and sources](#) about science communication and outreach.



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands