WORKING WITH MEDIA

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This check sheet offers best practices for researchers who engage with journalists and other members of the media. It includes strategies for getting started and preparing for media interviews.

WHY IT IS IMPORTANT TO ENGAGE

With mounting pressure to publish, teach, and do service, scholars may have limited time to return a phone call from a journalist. In addition, engaging with the media can be an intimidating experience. But effectively communicating your research broadens your audience, enabling you to reach not only fellow academics but also the general public. This is particularly important in the field of hazards and disasters, where reaching new audiences can increase public safety and impact policy. Gaining visibility for your research matters to the field and to the future funding landscape, will raise your and your university's research profile, and may help you find new collaborators.

GETTING STARTED

- ☐ Check in with your institution's press or media office about university rules and local norms; get on their radar so that they can give your name and contact information to journalists who might inquire.
- ☐ Learn more about the media landscape for your topic. Identify the media outlets and journalists that cover your subject area—locally, nationally, and globally.
- ☐ Know that there are many ways that you may be featured in the media today—including through radio, print, or television broadcasts, by writing your own op-ed or by sharing during a podcast (Image A).
- ☐ Don't wait around—pitch an idea to your university communications' team or directly to a journalist! You can do this by emailing a main news source address or even a particular reporter. In the email, offer a brief and tailored message with attention to what access you can offer and if any of the information is under embargo. For The Conversation, there is a specific form to fill out on their website (Image B).
- ☐ Remember that timing is everything in this field. If a high consequence event is unfolding, this may be your time to reach out to your university communications' team and to see if they are sending tip sheets to journalists.
- ☐ Consider and hone the unique viewpoint and experience that you can add to discussions of hazards and disasters at different geographic scales, before, during, and after events.
- ☐ Seek out training that prepares scholars and academics to effectively communicate with the media. Your university may offer media training. Other trainings include COMPASS, Scholars

Image A (Above). Social media image to promote Monteblanco's podcast episode, "Extreme Heat and Its Effect on Perinatal Health: An Update"

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Strategy Network, and Throughline; you may also find disciplinary organizations that offer training in your specific research area.

- ☐ Write a short biography, prepare a headshot, and collect photographs and video of your research (Mullane, 2020a,b) (Images C and D).
- ☐ Journalists tend to have fast and strict timelines. They may email or call you and request a response within an hour or by the end of the day, especially during newsworthy events.

ONCE YOU ARE APPROACHED FOR AN INTERVIEW

- ☐ Journalists tend to have fast and strict timelines. They may email or call you and request a response within an hour or by the end of the day, especially during newsworthy events.
- ☐ Review the outlet and reflect on the likely audience, including the audience's science literacy and potential social and political values.
- ☐ Review the journalist's previous work and, if possible, their motivations for interviewing you.
- ☐ Ask the journalist a few important questions: "What is the focus of the interview?" "Who else have you spoken to?" "How long do you expect the interview to last?" "Will the interview be audio or video recorded?"

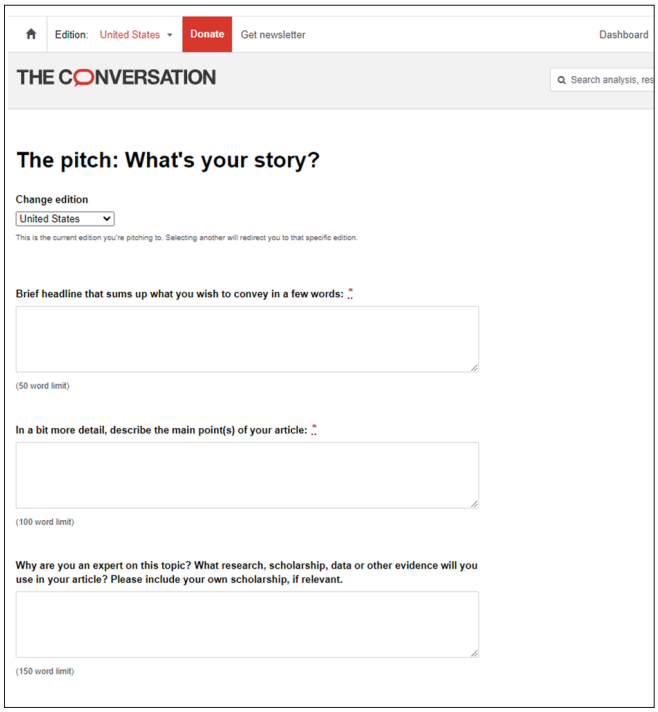

Image B (Above). A screenshot of The Conversation's pitch page (available to the author after they log in to submit a pitch) (from: https://theconversation.com/us/pitches/authors/new)

- ☐ Ask the journalist if they can provide the questions before the interview.
- ☐ If you don't have time or don't feel comfortable speaking on a topic, it is okay to turn down the interview.

Image C (Below). A photo taken during data collection. The image includes temperature sensors labeled for participant use. In working with the media, this photo showcased an important research tool without compromising data or participant privacy. Photo courtesy of Adelle Dora Monteblanco.

Image D (Above). A group photo taken during an educational and data collection event. The image is of the Urban Heat Youth Fellows research team. From left: Dr. Alisa Hass, students Sophia Roberts, Marissa Pickett and Hannah Newcomb, and Dr. Adelle Monteblanco. In working with the media, this photo showcased the research team without compromising data or participant privacy. Photo courtesy of Adelle Dora Monteblanco.

- ☐ Write down the three main points you want to make and ensure you make them during the interview.
- ☐ Practice saying, "I don't know," "that is beyond my scope," and "let's return to that question at the end."
- ☐ Reflect on additional names you might share with the interviewer to expand their understanding of the topic or answer questions you are unsure about.
- ☐ Remember that the goal is to communicate your work to the general population in an unambiguous and engaging way. Therefore, it is important to practice speaking about your work and/or the topic without using field-specific jargon
  - When writing for or speaking with the general public, it is often useful to aim for a 7th to 9th grade reading level.
  - Also, know that many quotes in newspapers are only a brief sentence or two, and most television news clips are only a few seconds. As such, brevity and clarity are key.
- ☐ Practice answers to potential questions, including general questions as well as deep nuanced questions. Consider recording yourself and playing it back to see what trips you up.
- ☐ Consider how you would like to frame the topic you are being interviewed on. For example, if you are being interviewed on hazard risk, how might you communicate the seriousness of a hazard situation and community preparedness without promoting disaster myths or increasing fear?
  - If there are fallacies that often come up about the topic, consider how you might address these fallacies if they emerge during the interview. For example, if you are being interviewed about a mass casualty disaster scenario, how might you address a journalist who assumes the public will panic and turn against one another?

DURING THE INTERVIEW

- ☐ Be confident in your ability to speak with journalists! You are an expert in your field and were invited to be interviewed because of this.
- ☐ Be polite and professional.
- ☐ It's appropriate to say "I don't know," to ask questions, and to request clarification.
- ☐ It is also fine to redirect a question toward a new line of inquiry that is more aligned with your expertise.
- ☐ Do not hesitate to pause to collect your thoughts before responding to a question.
- ☐ Avoid jargon.
- ☐ Communicate clearly and avoid filler words (e.g., um, ah, like, kind of).
- ☐ Avoid "off the record" comments; each journalist interprets this phrase differently.
- ☐ Expect to be audio recorded.
- ☐ Be "camera ready" as many interviews are now video recorded as well.
- ☐ Journalists may ask for you to share "a few names" of people in your study. Unless you asked permission to do this, do not pass along the names or contact information of your participants.
- ☐ Hazard and disaster events evolve rapidly. It may be helpful to communicate that conditions may change as you are discussing the current state of events and response.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

- ☐ You may ask to see a draft before publication (for review or approval), but there is no guarantee that your request will be honored. Many journalists do not share quotes in advance.
- ☐ Promote your article. Share the publication through social media and with your institution.
- ☐ Reflect on what you learned in the process. Write down the questions you felt ill-prepared for, so you can prepare for similar subsequent questions.
- ☐ If you are comfortable with the final product, say thank you and invite the journalist to contact you again.
- ☐ Share your work with your communications team and via your own social media. Help get the word out there!
- ☐ If you have a website, you should consider creating an "In the News" or "Media" page where you can link to articles, podcast episodes, or TV clips where you are featured! (Image E)

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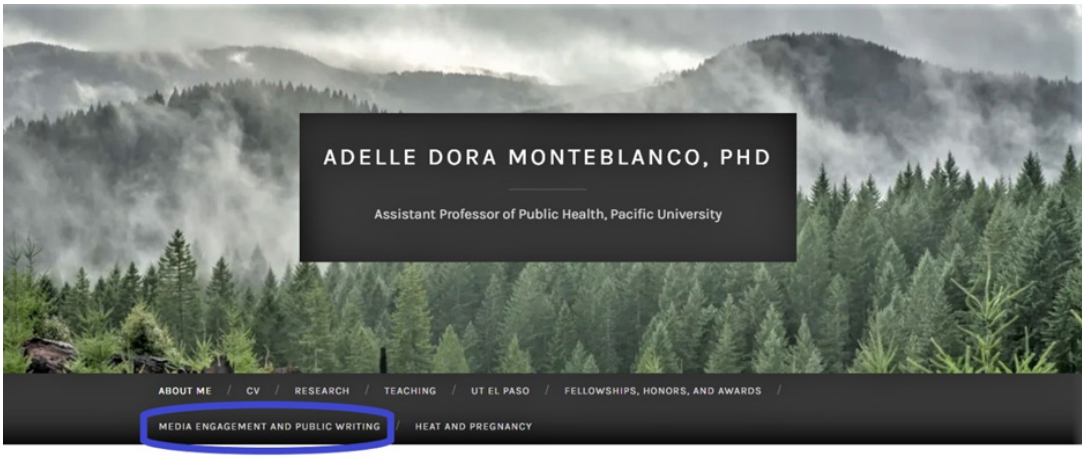

Image E (Above). Screenshot of Monteblanco's website, where she includes a tab on "Media Engagement and Public Writing." (from https://adelledoramonteblanco.wordpress.com/)

ADDITIONAL REMINDERS, WITH MEDIA EXAMPLES FROM THE AUTHORS

☐ Take small steps. Your comfort matters. We started with smaller audiences and outlets—student newspapers, university news outlets, and podcasts led by students and local groups. We continue to expand our scope and audience, speaking on local NPR radio and doing more frequent interviews with national outlets.

* Hass has spoken with numerous print journalists, beginning with an interview with a local non-profit's blog post, "A Hot Topic: The Urban Heat Island Effect" (2021) and her university's student-led newspaper for a story on "How Flooding Affects Tennessee" (2022) (Image F). This was helpful practice before a series of interviews with national news outlets on "Why the Southeastern US is Prone to Tornadoes" (2021) and a live panel interview with Knoxville's radio station on the topic of "Climate Change and Extreme Weather in Tennessee" (2022) (Image G).
* Monteblanco was interviewed on the podcast "Code Green – The Climate-Smart Health Professional Code Green Team," for an episode entitled "Climate Change and Pregnancy" (2021). This podcast was hosted and edited by curious, friendly medical students who were exploring the topic. Efforts like this helped prepare Monteblanco for subsequent interviews that required tighter audio responses, like an interview with Nashville's NPR station, "With Few Trees and More Concrete, Nashville is Heating Up" (2022).

Image F (Above). Screenshot of "How Flooding Affects Tennessee" article from Middle Tennessee State University newspaper, Sidelines. (from: https://mtsusidelines.com/2022/02/08/how-flooding-affects-tennessee/)

☐ **Nuance and distinctions may not be apparent in the final copy.** Most journalists do not have the flexibility in word count to offer a detailed history or clear distinctions as we may in a longer research article or book length manuscript. Journalists know their audience, including their attention span, and they know what resonates with their audience.

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* As one example, Monteblanco has been interviewed on numerous instances on the topic of midwives as disaster responders. In the context of the U.S., there are different types of midwives (certified nurse, direct-entry, certified professional, religious), with different types of training, expertise, and occupational privilege. Such differences matter to the provision of medical care during disaster response. Most often, when Monteblanco offers these details during interviews, this nuance is not included in the final piece. Rather, midwives are written about broadly, as a monolithic group, as in this article: From Wildfire to Hurricanes, Midwives Could Play a Key Role in Disaster Response (2022).

Image G (Above). Screenshot of recorded panel interview focused on "Climate Change and Extreme Weather in Tennessee", hosted by Dialogue. (from https://www.wuot.org/show/dialogue-on-wuot/2022-03-02/dialogue-climate-change-and-extreme-weather-in-tennessee)

☐ **You can't dictate language or terminology.** Within an interview, researchers might correct journalists on preferred and most accurate language, but in finalizing the piece, journalists still often rely on the more commonly used phrases. Scholars' strengths come from specialization, while journalists are trained to be generalists and report on a wide variety of topics. When preparing for the interview, consider how different wording and information might be interpreted by a general audience.

* For example, many disaster scholars bring attention to the unhelpfulness and dangerous assumptions of the phrase, "natural disasters." Briefly, disaster research demonstrates again and again that disaster causes, vulnerability, and consequences are shaped by social forces. This is not a small point, and many scholars believe a shift in language will help the public understand these events are not natural, nor are they inevitable. Like many others, we have encouraged journalists to avoid the language of "natural disasters" but rather to use "natural hazards" or "extreme events." Still, it is a difficult habit to break. As one example, "Summer Really is Getting Hotter—How to Stay Cool" (2022).

☐ **Your interview may not lead to a quote.** Not every interview with a journalist leads to being quoted in the final piece. Disaster researchers must go into media engagement work with an attitude of serving the public good, rather than doing it for a line on the CV under "Media Engagement." (When you are not quoted in the final piece, you may consider documenting interviews on your CV under a "Community Service" or similar heading.)

* For example, Monteblanco spoke with a journalist at Science magazine for about 30 minutes over Zoom, discussing data, her prior research, and the work she admires on the topic of pregnancy and extreme heat. She believes she offered important insight on the sub-field and national advocacy efforts, but she was not mentioned in the article (see: "Expecting Extremes" [2023]).
* As an additional example, Hass spoke with a journalist at Scientific American. The interview was pitched by the journalist to be on heat communication. During the interview, Hass brought up that one-way heat communication is being tested – the effectiveness of naming heat waves – and sent the journalist a number of links and research on the topic. The journalist decided to take the approach of heat wave naming instead

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of the broader heat communication topic when writing the article. While her research was linked to in the article, she was not mentioned in the article (see: "Classifying Heat Waves Will Help People Better Understand Their Dangers" [2023]).

☐ **Journalists often have a particular focus.** They tend to have a particular slant on the material, shaped by the publication, audience, or their own goals. Journalists may call looking for a specific quote that supports that focus.

* As one example, a journalist seemed to want a critical take of Multnomah County's response to the May 2023 heatwave that affected that part of Oregon. Monteblanco had lived in the area less than a year and was not privy to the conversations of the public health and emergency management departments, nor familiar with their budget and resource constraints to respond to the deadly heatwave. Rather than offering criticism of local response or government leaders, Monteblanco turned the attention to broader federal policy needs; see "Even 90-degree Heat Could Be Devastating" (2023).

☐ **It is difficult to communicate risk and uncertainty without creating distrust.** Uncertainty is part of research and health concerns, but as the COVID pandemic has made visible, communicating uncertainty can increase anxiety or distrust in audiences (Kalke et al. 2021).

* Monteblanco has struggled with communicating the difference between "cause" and "increased risk" to journalists. These words are not synonymous, but the general public may struggle to understand what "increased risk" means because of media consumers' science literacy and word count limitations. For example, Monteblanco is often asked about the link between individual heat exposure and adverse birth outcomes (e.g., preterm birth, low birth weight). It is difficult to attribute adverse health outcomes to a single cause, especially when exposure may have happened months before the health outcome is measured (Chersich et al. 2020). Too often, journalists use language that indicates direct causal relationships: "Extreme Heat Makes Pregnancy More Dangerous" (2022) (Image H).

☐ **Be cautious in sharing preliminary results.** Journalists are often eager to hear about preliminary or unpublished results. Decide ahead of time what results are appropriate to share, and be ready to explain when your results will be made public.

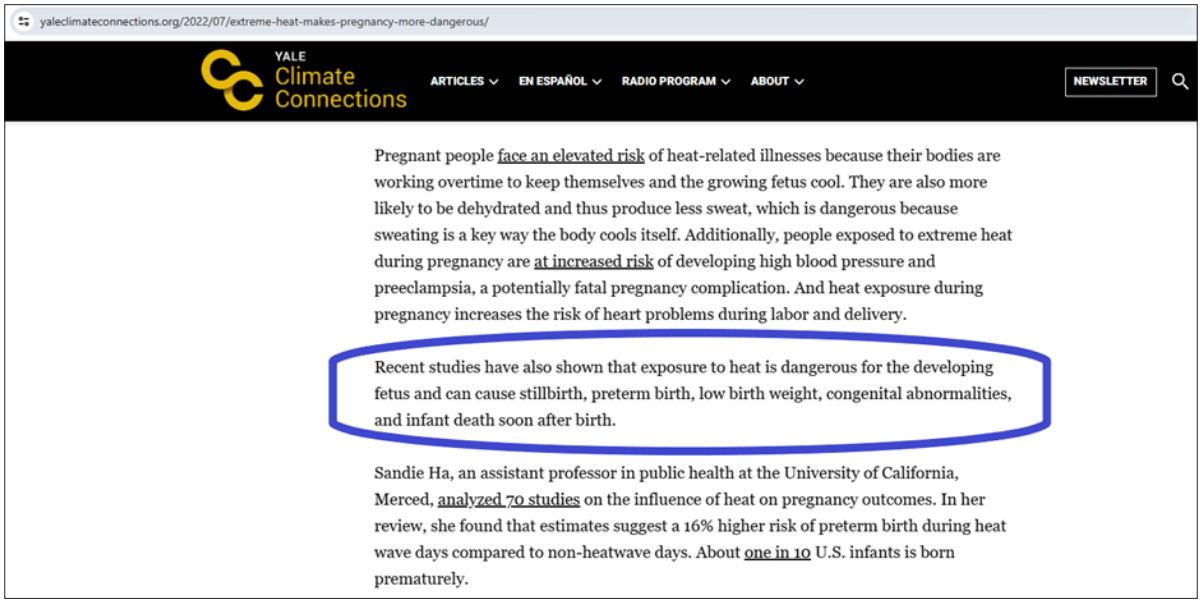

Image H (Above). Screenshot of text that reports an oversimplified causal relationship between heat exposure and adverse birth outcomes in a Yale Climate Connections new piece. (from https://yaleclimateconnections.org/2022/07/extreme-heat-makes-pregnancy-more-dangerous/)

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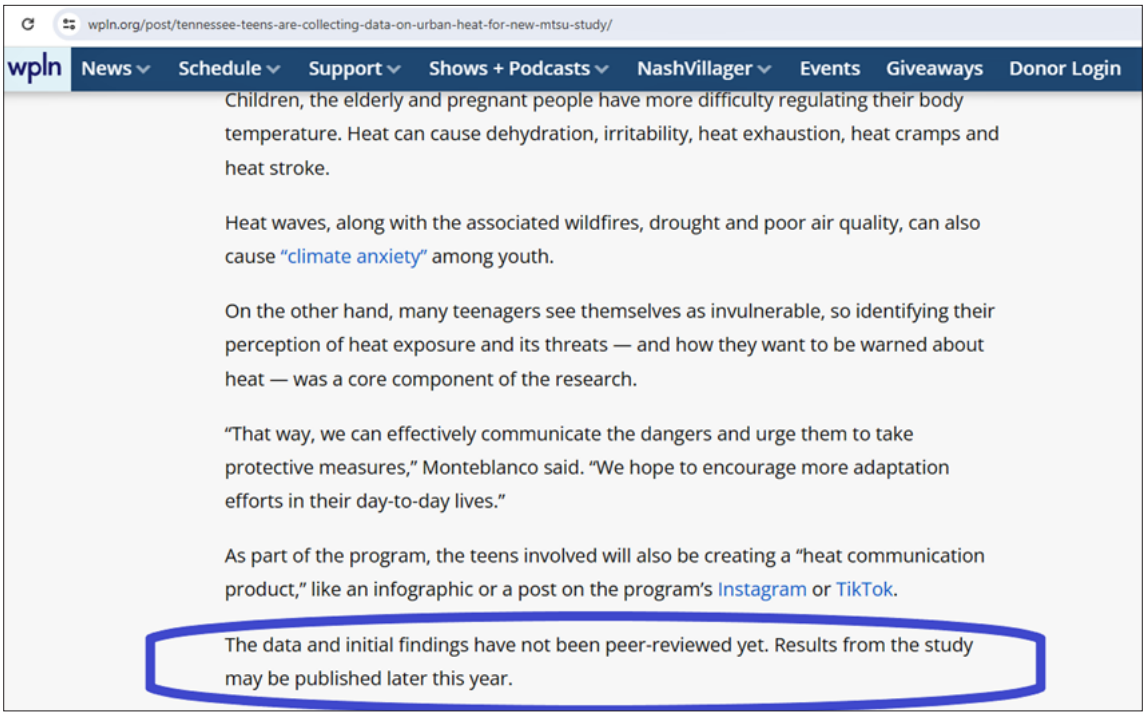

Image I (Above). Description: Screenshot, from WPLN News, offers one example of how a reporter might write about unpublished data. (from https://wpln.org/post/tennessee-teens-are-collecting-data-on-urban-heat-for-new-mtsu-study/)

* As an example, Monteblanco was interviewed on a project about heat and youth just days after the data had been collected. The journalist was asking for preliminary results, but Monteblanco said that the data were only beginning to be analyzed and were not peer-reviewed or public yet; see "Tennessee Teens are Collecting Data on Urban Heat for New MTSU Study" (2022) (Image I).

FINAL REFLECTIONS

- ☐ Get comfortable with tension: the timelines and agendas of academics differ from those of journalists, and that is okay!
- ☐ Understand whether and how media engagement is valued at your institution. For promotion, some institutions require demonstration of national visibility; quotes in national news articles can offer evidence of this. Other institutions may value engagement with local media outlets more highly, as they seek to demonstrate their relevance to the local community, taxpayers, and potential students.
- ☐ Reflect on how committed you are and how much time you can give to this work. As this check sheet makes clear, a lot of work goes into preparation for interviews, and there is no guarantee that your quote or research will appear in the final piece. If you don't have time or the ability to do face-to-face or virtual interviews, consider asking if you can respond to journalists' questions via email. This is especially

Image J (Above). Description: Name, logo, and slogan of media outlet, The Conversation.

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useful during hazardous events when you may have a number of different responsibilities to attend to.

- ☐ Perhaps engagement in popular news media, with its quick turnaround times and its limitations on detail and nuance, are not a good fit for you or your career trajectory. There are alternative ways to engage. We enjoy podcast interviews: the interviewee is often provided the questions ahead of time; podcasts are pre-recorded, so you can ask for a "do-over"; filler words such as "um" and "like" can be removed in post-production; it is more conversational and interactive than traditional interviews; and it is generally longer-form, with much more space for discussion. If you aim to publish in the popular media and want control over framing, pitch to The Conversation, where articles are written by academics/researchers and often picked up and published more widely by other news outlets (Image J). Here is an example from Hass: "Why the southern U.S. is prone to December tornadoes" (2021) (Image K).

Image K (Above). Description: Screenshot of Hass's co-written piece published at The Conversation, "Why the southern U.S. is prone to December tornadoes."

- ☐ Finally, have fun and know that sharing your work can make a real difference to the public.

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