

A SOLDIER IN THE SENSOID WARS: OBSERVATIONS FROM 25 YEARS ON BOTH SIDES OF THE BATTLEFIELD

By Stephan A. Schwartz

When the space community wants to develop a new program, or the international high energy physics field seeks grants to build a new accelerator, or the AIDS medical world wants funding for a new research vector, those scientists, I can assure you, consciously factor in the media as part of their strategy to obtain the money they need. Consider this remarkably candid comment, by climatologist Dr. Stephen Schneider, an advisor to Vice President Gore, about how it is done by those concerned with global warming: “To get some broader based support, to capture the public’s imagination...that, of course, entails getting loads of media coverage. So we have to offer up scary scenarios, make simplified dramatic statements, and make little mention of doubts we may have...”¹ Please be clear. I am not saying this is good science; I am saying this is the *realpolitik* of science for the foreseeable future. Anyone who doubts this has not been watching television or reading the papers.

However, using the media, as opposed to being used by the media takes a strategic vision, strong team cohesiveness, and a clear sense of appropriate tactics. Few individuals, unsophisticated in these battles, have been able to muster these tools to their advantage. In an era of decreased funding, and increased scrutiny, when disciplines as cohorts must struggle to keep their research moving forward, those who fail to master the media-funding nexus,

Here, then, are 14 points that, it seems to me, are critical if you, as a working scientist, are about to have an interaction with the media.

To give my remarks some context it seems appropriate to mention that, to the best of my knowledge, I am the only member of the panel who has been at various times, and sometimes concurrently, a working journalist, for both daily, weekly, and national monthly publications, an editor of national magazines employing writers, an experimental scientist whose work has been the focus of media, and the producer and writer of national network television. I cite this, not out of hubris, but because I want to be clear that my remarks are not based

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on speculation or surmise, but come from more than 25 years on both sides of the media table. Let me take them in sequence:

Point Number One: If you are going to be the focus of media attention accept that you are a commodity. What is about to happen is only secondarily about science and the information you want to get across -- the news you think you have. Mostly it is about the reporter's agenda. Media, today, is a multi-billion dollar business dealing in a commodity which might be called Sensoids. A sensoid is a unit of attention grabbing data, whether pictures, sounds or words. It is different than a datum, A datum is a self-contained unit of information. Data drives science. Sensoids drive media. A sensoid is designed to produce an emotional reaction in the person who sees it or reads it, and it is the reaction that gives it its value. Every editor of every publication, and every producer of every television show knows that, first and foremost, he or she must capture the attention of a consumer who is constantly being bombarded with sensoids, or lose out to the competition. Don't have any illusions about what is taking place in your interaction with the media. You are a commodity to be used in the sensoid wars.

Point Number Two: The media comes to every story with attitude. Every reporter, sadly, develops the intellectual callous of institutionalized cynicism. The healthy side of this is probing skepticism. The dark side is the reporter's fear that he or she is going to be made to seem a fool *in the eyes of colleagues*. This is particularly true of things anomalous to the accepted view. When there is anything anomalous there is sure to be a miasma of claims and counterclaims, not least because there exists a rabid, albeit tiny, group of professional skeptics whose careers are really a function of their skepticism. I once assigned a reporter to cover a story on Ambrose and Olga Worrall and healing. He came back incredibly energized by what he had seen, Healing had occurred, although nothing miraculous had happened, which he thought made what had had seen all the more real. The next day I walked by a luncheon table where this same reporter was being teased by three other reporters for being so gullible. The story he subsequently filed was filled with sneering little digs. No one was going to say he had been fooled. Just as bureaucrats rarely get into trouble saying, "No," reporters rarely get criticized for excessive skepticism.

Point Number Three: All interactions with media are transactions in power. The person who is interviewing you is not your friend; however friendly they may seem. It is in their interest to make "contact" with you. But your meeting is occurring because they are doing their job. Never forget that. Unless you do something to change the equation, you are in a subordinate position of power. The reporter, and other people like editors, whom you will never meet, not you, in the end, are going to control how you and your lab look and sound.

Even in on-air interview shows like *Nightline*, the “house” has an advantage, because it gets to pick the other guests, and the moderator asks the questions, and times who and when will answer them. So infrequently does the interviewer lose control that Ted Koppel, in his recent book, makes a point of noting how exceptional it is. He cites Mandy Gruenwald, a Democratic advisor to President Clinton in the 1992 elections, as one of the very few people to have bested him., You are not without resources, however -- if you know how to use them. Otherwise, depending on how it suits the reporter, you can be made either a hero or roadkill.

Point number Four: Your media persona and your academic life are two different worlds. Don't confuse them. Have you ever wondered how people like Carl Sagan become media celebrities, and yet continue to enjoy powerful reputations in science? Shouldn't the one debase the other? The fact is that Sagan, Stephen J. Gould, and the late Jonas Salk and Margaret Mead, to name but a few, all mastered one critical skill. They made sure they did not confuse their academic writings and presentations with their media interactions. They understood that how they talked to the media was very different from the way they presented their research at a professional conference. This extends to their tone of voice, their choice of words, their facial expressions, and their body language. You do not have to convince the world you are academically qualified, or that your research is “science.” Do not be defensive on that issue. What the reporter wants from you is a pre-digested encapsulation of the subject matter. They want good copy, good images. They want personality -- strange quirks like Einstein not wearing socks -- they make good copy and good images. Most of all reporters personally want to have the sense that they've come to the right place. In academic presentations modifiers and caveats are appropriate and the norm. In print they can be used very judiciously, in electronic media far less. Reporters think of our normal caveats as “weasel” words and, to the viewer or reader they make the speaker seem either shifty or incompetent. It is O.K. to say “We don't know.” That makes you human. It is not O.K. to say “Under certain circumstances, when the variables have been properly controlled we can expect to see a marginally significant effect on the order of $p = 0.05$.”

Point Number Five: Never Condescend. Sometimes, when we are pressed or feel threatened we retreat into our researcher personae and this can come across as condescending. Don't do this. Years ago, when I was just a beginning reporter, I went to a conference to interview a sociologist who had been doing longitudinal studies. I had taken the trouble to read his papers, and was seriously interested in getting some data from him for my piece. My questions made him defensive, increasingly academic, and increasingly condescending. Finally, in answer to one question he said “Look, there's no point in my

answering that because you aren't competent to understand my answer." I used that quote describing the way and tone in which he said it. It crucified him.

Point Number Six: Avoid all jargon, acronyms, insider references and words bigger than those you would find in the newspaper. This is an extension of the previous point but an independent consideration as well. Never. Never. Never use anything other than simple standard English that a high school student could comprehend. All verbal shorthand, and terms-of-art are recipes for disaster. Things like RNG, or regression analysis, make the reporter feel stupid -- which has the effect of creating covert hostility -- and make you sound like a smartass to the reader or viewer. If you must use a term, explain it in the same sentence first. For instance, "We use a computer program, which we call a random number generator, you might hear it referred to as an RNG, to make sure that..."

Point Number Seven: Be clear why you have agreed to the interview. Why are you doing this interview? If you are doing it solely because you were asked to do it, and your ego is flattered, you are making a mistake, and potentially hurting yourself and the field. All interviews hold potential for disaster, and their impact, negative or positive will almost invariably extend like the ripples produced by a stone thrown into a pool, beyond you and your lab. You are a representative for us all. Media relies on the power of ego. Reporters and editors operate on the hypothesis that everyone wants his or her 15 minutes of fame. The media interaction should never be an end-product for you. It should be part of a process; a tactical tool to focus attention on you and your lab, or the field for some clearly defined purpose. Be honest with yourself about why you want that attention. Also try to find out something about your interviewer. Do your own research. Don't walk into the headlights like a deer. Always have a goal, and never lose focus.

Point Number Eight. Work out, in advance, the two or three points you want to make. This is probably the most important point I will make today. A media interaction is not a classroom lecture, nor a conference presentation. If you are doing the interview for the right reasons, and you have planned correctly, you should want to get just a few straightforward points across. Your greatest strength is your ability, as politicians and their handlers say, to "stay on message." *Get your two or three points each down to a single simple declarative sentence.* Practise those sentences until you don't stumble or say "ah". Look at yourself in the mirror. Look at your body language. Is it wooden? Is your expression pleasant? Put energy in your eyes and in your voice. If you can get your two or three points sympathetically and compellingly across, you win.

Point Number Nine: There is a difference between a media interaction with a print outcome and one that will be broadcast. Don't confuse the two.

The interactions have different dynamics, and only a few similarities. Ask immediately how your information will be used. Newspapers and news shows have the tightest space/time requirements and, thus, you must be particularly sensitive to staying concise and on focus. You need to structure your presentation very differently depending on its final use.

Point Number Ten. Don't forget set and setting. Print is literary. A print reporter has to paint a picture that his electronic counterpart mostly has as a gift of her technology. But in both instances set and setting are important. A print reporter, particularly, wants local color. What are you wearing? What do your surroundings look like? What books do you have on your shelves? Did you shave carefully? Is your perfume offensive? Your dress provocative? There is much more editorial observation in print. Set and setting is a place where you have control. Use it. Plan the interaction with the same care you would use to structure a session with a psychic respondent. With a print reporter don't assume anything is off-the-record unless it has been explicitly agreed between you and, even then, don't assume the flavor of your response will not be used. Print reporters wait for the "official" interview to be over, to catch their interviewee in a more relaxed "human" response. With a print reporter who may be hostile, or who has a reputation for making up or altering quotes (you've done your homework, remember), you might consider taping the interview yourself. This is a provocative act, so it has a certain downside, but it is perfectly permissible. I always say that challenging questions (which I am implying the reporter is going to ask) stimulate me to think, and I find the answers useful in other contexts. If you are going to tape, do so at the beginning. It is a real show stopper to start in the middle of the interview. It implies you don't trust the interviewer. With television or radio the nature of the medium gives the record. Here your task is to get in the visual things you want (to the degree that you can) during the taping. If it is television, think visually. Television loves gadgets and "labs."

Point Number Eleven. Television is about sound bites. If it is a television interview realize that most of what you will say will end up on the editing room floor. Television is broken into segments that are usually no more than four minutes in length. Hard news shows like the evening news cut to 30 seconds or less. News magazine shows like 20/20 rarely go longer than two segments. That means your deathless words will probably be on the order of eight to 10 seconds in a clip. Television, by its nature is about sound bites. Don't fight this, use it to your advantage. One way you can have power in an interview is to make everything else but your two or three key point sentences unusable. President Eisenhower was a master at this. Except for the point he was trying

to make his sentences were so long and convoluted that they could not be used as sound bites. He made the editors pick the things he wanted people to hear. You can do the same thing.

Point Number Twelve. Anticipate criticism and answer it. All media people are trained to find a “balance” person -- read skeptic -- to give their interviews or stories “objectivity.” Like my previous recommendation about sound bites, don’t fight this, use it. Think moves ahead, like a chess player. Say something like, “Some skeptics sound knowledgeable but have not actually ever done an experiment or read the scientific literature on this subject. When someone says there is no data ask them ‘how many experiments have you personally done?’ ‘What specifically about Dr. Smith’s research do you find lacking? I’ll bet they tell you that we did not control for... In fact we.....” Reporters, and tape editors -- the people who assemble a segment, and who are as important as reporters in television -- love this stuff. The reporter may well ask the question you’ve suggested, when she interviews the skeptic “balance” person, usually without revealing that you have raised the point, and the editor will juxtapose the answers. It makes for controversy, which is good television. I have seen some wonderful foot in mouth results.

Point Number Thirteen. Illustrate concepts by examples people can understand. Whenever possible tie your data to something people know in their everyday lives. To illustrate the variance from chance you might say, “You may hear that the data does not support this conclusion but you should realize that the chances of this occurring by chance are 30 million to one, that’s about 30 times less likely than being hit by lightning.” Also remember, everyone likes to laugh. If you aren’t funny, reveal a humorous incident about yourself in which you were a little clutzy. Humor, though, is a grace note. It should never be used in place of a serious answer to a serious question. Doing that makes you seem like you are avoiding something, and reporters are trained to sniff out avoidance like pigs sniff truffles.

Point Number Fourteen: If you go to an academic conference to deliver a paper, and the media may be present, or the situation, results, or implications are likely to draw attention, develop a strategy for dealing with that attention before you present.

In 1980, I came back from Egypt and presented the work we had done in the Eastern Harbor at the annual conference of the Association for Underwater Archaeology. Two reporters had seen the reference in the program and, came to my talk and, by the time I got out of the hall, had set in motion a chain of events for which I was naively unprepared. The day after I got back, I awoke and went out to get the morning paper and found seven news crews standing at the edge

of my driveway. I did not have a strategy to deal with the media, because I hadn't anticipated their interest. In the days that followed, even though I had once been a reporter, I had not really thought about things from the other side, and I made a lot of mistakes, and learned a lot. If you are reporting something new. Or there is an angle that might catch the media's attention, like the Boy Scouts "Be Prepared." It may only happen once in your career but, when the spotlight is on, and the great sensoid digester begins its work, it is too late to develop a plan and you may be defined by what you do, in those few days, for the rest of your life.

I hope these points help you. The media is a fact of life like the wind and tides. And, like wind and tide it can either overwhelm you or work for you. The choice is yours, and the decisions you make may determine your future in your field.

¹ Colby Cosh. "C02 sucker-punch". *Alberta Report*. vol. 23, no. 34. pp 16-20.