

## Key Words

Written Communication  
Case Study

Cultural astronomy has several formal definitions, but, in a nutshell, it is the study of the relationship that humans have with the night sky. This topic overlaps with the larger issue of how humans have responded to their natural environment over the ages. Archaeoastronomy is the most popular branch of cultural astronomy and encompasses how studying the heavens was embraced by the cultures of ancient civilisations. Stone tombs and monuments are the lasting legacies of this ancient cultural knowledge of the night sky. There are also studies of celestial knowledge being used as a form of social control, such as by the Sun King Shaka Zulu, and studies of how

humans have used the sky to try to predict the future. The history of astronomy and the myths and legends associated with the night sky are nowadays an integral part of introductory astronomy classes, star parties and planetarium shows. In modern times, astronomy has also influenced our culture, through art, dance, music and poetry. Cultural astronomy engages the public by showing a human side of astronomy that people can relate to.

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One of 177 Antas, a distinctive form of megalithic tomb, found in the central part of the Alentejo region, Portugal, and in the provinces of Badajoz and Cáceres, in the Extremadura region of Spain. These tombs are thought to have been constructed from c. 4000 BC onwards. The range of orientations of the 177 monuments corresponds almost exactly to the range of possible rising positions of the Sun. Credit: I. Gomes (www.flickr.com/photos/ivogomes). More information: www.astronomicalheritage.org



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## Key Words

Media Relations  
Pitching a Story  
Media Requests

## Summary

Talking to the media about a particular expertise or passion might seem easy, but not knowing certain details of the media interaction process often prevents science communicators from sharing their knowledge and expressing their enthusiasm to journalists and, through them, to their final audience, the public. Here is some advice on how to make the most of talking to the press.

One of the oldest roles of the mass media has been compared to that of a watchdog, guarding the public space by deciding which pieces of information are allowed through. In the process of communicating science to the public, science communicators will often resort to mass media channels as a way of reaching out to a greater target audience. Inevitably, this leads to contact with journalists who will then decide if or how the story is actually published.

Communication between science communicators and journalists is challenging because a misstep anywhere in the process can mean failure or success. So it is crucial for a communicator to develop media relations skills that can help to get a story across.

So how can the watchdog be tamed so that the communicator can cross the threshold into media territory and reach the interested audience at the other end? There is no specific recipe, but there are some basic steps that can help make the process not only less difficult, but also more pleasant.

There are two general cases when science communicators interact with the media: proactive communication, when the communicator pitches a story to journalists, and reactive communication when journalists request information from the communicator.

## Case 1: Make the watchdog your friend

It is natural to think that media relations start when a dialogue begins between the two parties, communicators and journalists, and that the most important aspect in media relations is what one party says and sells. However, there is another step, before contact is even made, which is even of greater importance as it determines how the relationship kicks off — research!

According to standard communication strategies, the first step a communicator should take is to research the relevant media target, as well as the organisation and the sector where it is active. The primary objective of this research is to get to know the mass media channels and its journalists in as much detail as the journalists are supposed to know their own target audience.

Communicators should be familiar with the specifics of each targeted media channel in a depth that goes far beyond the obvious issues — for example, be aware of the difference between communications that target written publications versus television, or radio versus online. Other important details are a media outlet's editing policies, its planning of monthly topics for the current year, favoured topics, its area of coverage,

whether it has a science journalism department (and its size), the names of the journalists covering science, deadlines, format and style of written/broadcast materials.

Most of this information is usually easily accessible, but gathering it is a time-consuming process. The first place to look is the website of the mass media channel, where editing policies, the mission statement, departments and the names of journalists working for the media channel are all available. Sometimes media channels will even upload presentations about their targets onto their websites, that is, information about their reach, distribution, audience or traffic — all fascinating numbers for any communicator. For future topics or thematic numbers/editions/shows contact the editor-in-chief/producer and simply ask for this information. In most cases, they will gladly share it with you. Make sure you also ask for any deadlines that they might have for submitting press releases or pitching a story that is in line with the topic.

Communicators should also carry out research at the personal level. Journalists in your database should be more than just the people you talk to when you have something to communicate on behalf of your organisation. They should be your professional friends, or, even better, simply your friends.

As in your personal life, you should get to know their likes and dislikes, hobbies, family and friends, professional background, where they spend their vacation etc.

Ideally, this knowledge would come naturally from contact with a journalist on a variety of occasions, and not just when you are pitching a story. However, for practical reasons you will not be able to make friends with each and every one of them. Make sure you research for sufficient information that will allow you to identify the best way and timing to contact a particular journalist, as well as the most interesting approach to take for a story that will make it appeal to the journalist. You can do this very easily today with the help of the social media that blur the boundaries between professional and personal lives and allow you to access parts of the private life of a journalist. You could search for a personal blog, for example. Take your time and read through posts, identify interests, likes and dislikes, opinions.

Once you have come to know your journalist, you are more likely to be able to present your story from the right angle, engage them in the topic and take a more friendly approach. With the right background information you can make your story more scientific, or give it a more human touch as appropriate. As a result, journalists will be more open to listen to you and, often, they will brainstorm with you on how the story could be given an even more interesting spin. Make sure you always try to offer at least one of the following extras, if not all: valuable information, interesting insights and spectacular imagery that makes your story, and ultimately their article, appealing and unique.

After you have provided all the information for the story, it is advisable to not just wait and see what happens. Try to get an impression of the final look or draft of the material before it is published. This will not always be possible, due either to editorial policies or simply to the journalist's own working practices. Asking to see a story prior to publication is a sensitive issue and if you do not know the journalist that well, or fear that you might upset or offend him, it is better to trust him and wait for the release of the story. As in any type of relationship, trust is built with time and sometimes by taking some risks.

Mark the day of release in your calendar and check the article as early in the day as possible. Read it carefully and if there are any factual errors in the material, point them out to the journalist in a friendly manner and they will normally be willing to correct them. Do not forget to thank the journalist for the collaboration and continue to keep in touch with him. Don't comment on anything other than factual errors as journalists have to have total freedom in how they present a story.

## Case 2: The watchdog comes after you

Sometimes a journalist who wants to write a story featuring the organisation you represent will contact you. The first thing to do in such situations is to read the questions, make sure you fully understand the request and to answer instantly, not offering any direct answers, but simply acknowledging the request. If there are questions that you are not sure that you fully understand, now it is the time to ask for details.

Before you are able to give any information addressing the story, research must be done. Focus on the topic of the story. Identify the organisational information that might be useful and how much can be made public, who are the most appropriate people to speak in the name of the organisation or who could give you more information. Always try to offer more than requested, but do not include organisational facts that are irrelevant to the topic. Depending on the subject, you could suggest an interview, indicate a scientific paper, or offer the possibility of a visit that could help the journalist gather more information. Finally, research what has been written on the topic and make sure you can bring added value to the table, whether it is new data in the field, other opinions and perspectives, predicted future developments etc.

Also, do some background research on the journalist. If you have not interacted with her before, the process described earlier should be followed, although not necessarily in so much depth as time will likely not allow it. If you have done your homework and your database is up to date, it should contain detailed information about the journalist, and you will have an easier job in interacting with her, saving time that can be used for investigating the topic itself.

Once the research is done, you can prepare the answers. There is no question that cannot be addressed — even though you may have to say "no comment". Be as thorough as possible and never assume that something is known or obvious. Attach documents for further information if they are available. Finally, make sure you reply within the journalist's deadline. If you have set up an interview, do a short media training session with the person to be interviewed and be present at the meeting. If you have arranged a visit, plan ahead and make sure that everything is in place as journalists have sharp eyes and will spot the tiniest inconsistency.

On the due date of publication, read the article as soon as it comes out so as to be able to react instantly, regardless of the situation: either to send congratulations or to deal with issues arising. At this point, there are several

possibilities, depending on the tone of the article and the accuracy of the information. An article can have positive, neutral or negative spin, and it can be entirely correct or contain some wrong information.

A positive or neutral article with correct information is obviously the preferred situation. If this is the case, make sure you contact the journalist on the same day of the release to congratulate him for the material and thank him for the collaboration.

If you find yourself in the less pleasant situation, with a negatively nuanced article, read through the arguments. If all the information is correct and the negative take is simply the opinion of the journalist, there is little to be done, and it is important not to let the journalist know how you feel, since he has the right to an opinion. Thank him for the article and try to understand what is the cause of the negative opinion. Is it something you need to improve inside the organisation or is it simply a matter of personal belief that could be improved? The most you can do, if the situation allows it, is to try to improve his opinion, for example, by inviting him to see how observations are done or how data is handled if he hasn't yet had that opportunity, and hope that this might impress him.

Finally, if the article is positive or neutral, but it contains some incorrect information, contact the journalist, thank him for the collaboration and point out any mistakes, asking if they can still be corrected. In most cases, journalists will appreciate a friendly indication of a mistake as delivering correct information is important for their reputation and the reputation of the mass media channel they are working for. Lastly, do not forget to keep in touch and update your database with all the useful information that you have found about the journalist from this collaboration and which can be used on future occasions.

## Biography

**Oana** is a communicator with a passion for astronomy, as much as she is an amateur astronomer with a passion for communication. With a degree in Communication and Public Relations and a Masters Degree in Marketing, Oana is working as community coordinator for ESO's education and Public Outreach Department. She heads the public relations work for the Space Generation Advisory Council, as well as for other international organisations and projects. Previously she worked for one of the leading PR agencies in Romania and Eastern Europe. To get in touch with Oana visit her blog [www.astronomycommunication.wordpress.com](http://www.astronomycommunication.wordpress.com) or connect on Twitter ([www.twitter.com/oana.sandru](http://www.twitter.com/oana.sandru)).