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LOS ALAMOS NATIONAL LABORATORY

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*news media
relations guide*

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foreword

Interest in scientific research has increased enormously in recent years. The public is curious about new discoveries, their potential applications, and their possible effects on the life of the average person. The press and electronic media, while catering to this interest, influence public opinion and can contribute positively toward a better understanding of science and an appreciation of research and development.

Newspaper, radio, and television reporters, feature writers, and science journalists are the liaison between the Laboratory and the public. As employees of a tax-supported institution, we are obliged to communicate accurate and understandable information about our failures and successes, problems and solutions, and the risks and rewards of attempting to cross new technical frontiers. Mutual respect and cooperation between the scientist and the reporter, a prerequisite for effective communication, will lead to improved news coverage for scientific research and development, and ultimately to a better informed public.

Although the University of California has no formal policy for dealing with reporters, Los Alamos National Laboratory has a specific policy. The policy requires that approval first be obtained from the Public Affairs Office (PAO) before releasing information to the news media. In most cases, the PAO will recommend that employees answer an inquiry themselves, with assistance from a member of its staff if necessary. However, we should remember that even while speaking as individuals, we are often identified as employees of the Laboratory.

This booklet is intended to help you deal with the news media. It offers suggestions for improving communication and points out pitfalls to avoid. Please take time to read and think about this material. If you have any questions, call our Public Affairs Office, 7-7000.

Donald M. Kern

LOS ALAMOS NATL. LAB. LIBS.



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introduction

The Public Affairs Office (PAO) is the Los Alamos National Laboratory's official contact with the news media. It receives hundreds of inquiries each year about our operations and research programs and deals regularly with free-lance writers, reporters, and news writers from local and national newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. The PAO staff knows most local news media people and national science writers. Members of the staff are familiar with news-gathering procedures and are available to assist employees in their dealings with the media. But their help is limited. Sometime you may have to talk to news media people over the telephone, in your office or laboratory, at a scientific meeting, or elsewhere. This booklet offers some suggestions for dealing with the news media.

Whether you realize it or not, your interviewer and audience will probably consider you an official Laboratory representative, speaking with full authority on the subject of the interview or any other subject on which you comment. Please use discretion when speaking to a reporter to protect yourself and the Laboratory from embarrassment.

When you are unauthorized to speak on behalf of the Laboratory or when you wish to express your personal viewpoints, make it clear that you are not speaking as a Laboratory representative. Please understand, however, that in some situations, it is impossible to dissociate yourself from your position with the Lab and utmost discretion is advised.

Who writes the news

The people who write or gather science news vary in their knowledge of science. At one extreme are the general reporters for newspapers, wire services, television, and radio, who may know little about science and may lack even a rudimentary scientific vocabulary. At the other extreme are the news people who specialize in one or more scientific

fields, such as medicine, defense, energy, space, or the environment. These science writers are usually well informed on the subjects they cover, are able to discuss them in some depth, and are prepared to do a thorough job of science reporting. Both general reporters and science writers play key roles in communicating science news to the public.

the general reporter

Although science articles are as widely read as the sports page, most newspapers do not have full-time science writers on their staffs. Most science news, therefore, is written by general reporters, who may cover science only part-time and who may have little or no academic training in the sciences.

Working with general reporters will, in many instances, challenge your ingenuity. Although their stories may seem superficial to you, they fulfill the public's interest in knowing "what's going on in the world of science." Also, you should remember that general reporters often have a tight deadline and must carry out their assignments with or without your help.

Some suggestions for working with the general reporter follow.

- Proceed slowly and supply background data in understandable language to orient the reporter.
- Use analogies to common things when possible. The reporter will be striving to simplify accurately and will rely heavily on you to make this possible.
- Be prepared to comment on the general implications of your work and what your findings mean to the average person.

Remember, general reporters may extrapolate incorrectly. Therefore, you should make sure they understand the difference between preliminary data and final results and between potential and verified applications.

the science writer

A different situation exists with a specialized science writer. These specialists are usually more understanding of your traditional caution and the objectivity of science. Their questions are more perceptive, they speak your language, and they are better equipped to judge the significance of a report. Many researchers enjoy working with science writers, and these writers often have a closer kinship with scientists than with other journalists.

Like general reporters, newspaper science writers also have deadlines to meet, but their deadlines may not necessarily be keyed to the next edition of the paper. They may gather information simultaneously on several stories whose order of publication may depend simply on which one is completed first. In addition to a daily article, some science writers are responsible for a Sunday-edition science page that provides an opportunity for in-depth coverage of one or more subjects.

Magazine science writers operate a bit differently. In addition to having less deadline pressure, they can usually treat their subjects in more detail and therefore with greater accuracy than those who write for newspapers. Also, magazine writers will sometimes submit copy to you to check its scientific accuracy. However, they are not required to do so, and the same suggestions apply as when dealing with general reporters.

meeting the news people

When you are queried directly by members of the news media, remember that Laboratory policy requires you to notify the Public Affairs Office before releasing any information. When you receive such a call you should:

- (1) write down the news media person's name and telephone number, the news outlet for which he or she works, and the information requested;
- (2) assure the person that you or someone from PAO will call back as soon as possible, and follow up to make sure this is done;
- (3) discuss the call with your supervisor, if that seems appropriate; then
- (4) call PAO to discuss how to handle the inquiry.

In most cases PAO will recommend that you talk to the reporter directly. However, a member of the PAO staff can join the interview (including a teleconference for a telephone interview) if desired.

Questions about the Laboratory's position on such matters as government regulations, proposed legislation, Congressional hearings, "politically hot" issues, and DOE budgets are referred to the Director's Office by Public Affairs.

Any unusual occurrence or emergency should be reported promptly to the Public Affairs Office. Often, such events require formal investigation, which precludes discussion with the media. Laboratory employees should refer all press queries to the PAO in emergency or unusual situations.

There are circumstances under which it is perfectly justifiable to refuse to talk to members of the news media, and PAO will explain to the news representative if you have a valid reason for not answering a query. For example, the first disclosure of scientific results normally is made to the scientific community through the technical literature, not directly to the public. When you refuse an interview on this basis, however, you should contact the interested news representative through PAO when the news can be announced. News releases from PAO contain a release date, which informs the media when they can print or broadcast the information. Ordinarily, you need not worry about a premature disclosure; "jumping a release date" is universally condemned in news circles, and no responsible news person will do it knowingly. Classification is another legitimate reason for silence—just be certain that the information sought by the reporter is truly classified.

Be skeptical of people who aren't explicit about what publication or news service they represent and how they intend to use the information. If unsure, have PAO verify the person's credentials.

In general, it's best to cooperate with news media people. You can't stop them from going after a story. It's to your advantage, and the Laboratory's, to help them get the facts straight. Talk with them, not down to them.

the interview

PAO will be happy to coordinate the arrangements for interviews. When possible, you should give information to the interviewer in advance. The best way to do so is in writing because this reduces the chance of your being misunderstood or misquoted. Next best is a personal interview, especially if the reporter uses a tape recorder. Least desirable is a telephone interview, which is most likely to lead to errors and misinterpretations.

After you begin talking to a reporter, you may discover that you are the wrong one to be discussing the subject. In such cases, ask the person to contact the PAO staff, who will attempt to find the correct employee to answer the questions.

Because of tight deadlines, more news gathering is done by telephone than by any other means. Always offer to put information in writing; but if there isn't time, enunciate clearly and give the facts in logical order. Keep it simple, and offer to check the information by having the interviewer repeat it.

The person-to-person interview is usually most satisfactory for all concerned. To help ensure a successful interview:

- Meet where there will be a minimum of interruption, preferably where you won't be bothered by the telephone.
- Consider having with you an associate to supplement your answers or to get information from the files and someone from the PAO staff.
- Try to have the interviewer submit questions in advance, if you can.

Scientists who aren't accustomed to being interviewed are sometimes unnerved when their replies produce a blank stare. The interviewer may not be inept; he or she may merely be thinking, may not understand, or may just have the somewhat typical poker face. Give him or her the benefit of the doubt.

An interview is usually terminated by the interviewer after he or she has the material needed for the story. If you have another appointment, make that clear before the interview begins, or have PAO do so.

You may offer to review the story for scientific accuracy, stressing the fact that you're trying to be helpful. If you make such an offer, however, remember that the news media person is under no obligation to show you the copy—the Constitution guarantees freedom of the press. On the other hand, some science writers are ready and willing to have their copy checked for accuracy, if time permits. If time is short, you might suggest that the news media person read the copy to you over the telephone. But remember, when reviewing the copy, be especially alert to the accuracy of direct quotes attributed to you and limit your corrections to matters of scientific fact. Leave literary style alone.

In summary, suggestions for an interview are similar to those for being a good courtroom witness:

- Give the facts, keep them simple, and stay alert.
- Answer questions fully, but don't feel that you have to bare your soul.
- If you make a witty comment, the news person will be delighted, but before you say it, think how it's going to look in tomorrow's paper.
- Don't mislead news media people. Good reporters have developed a technique similar to that of a trial lawyer, and if you do try to mislead, it is more than likely that they'll have you tangled in a maze of your own contradictions in nothing flat.
- Don't give news media people information off-the-record. Reporters are frustrated by off-the-record information because they came for a story they can use, and unusable information often prevents them from turning a routine story into a big one. If you must go off-the-record, be sure to indicate when you are "back on." Off-the-record material should not be confused with unattributable material. The latter is information that may be published, but whose source is not fully identified—as in the expression "a Laboratory official said today that..."

television and radio

Occasionally, you may be contacted by television or radio reporters. For them, time is a constant enemy. Spot-news programs are measured in terms of a few seconds to a minute or two of air time and can usually report only the barest essentials of your work. In most cases television and radio reporters will be looking for one or two succinct answers or quotes from you.

If you are to be interviewed for television, make a special effort to put together a demonstration or display—a chart, graph, or diagram that illustrates, clearly and simply, the subject to be discussed. Try to plan ahead to allow sufficient time to have the illustrations prepared. If illustrations are appropriate, have one large color poster prepared with large lettering and sharp contrast, or one large photo. It should be a display that can be scanned in just a few seconds—that's probably all the time it will get—and it must include the Laboratory insignia. Use color illustrations when possible, but don't overlook the blackboard as a quick, convenient way to explain a complicated point while on camera. Speak clearly and slowly, move slowly, and dress appropriately.

The typical television news team consists of a photographer and a reporter, who may have a small tape recorder. Often a photographer handles the assignment alone. Full video news teams, that is, a photographer, a sound person, and a reporter-director, are reserved for the most important assignments.

News media people are always eager to have a story in the scientist's own words. Radio news, in particular, relies on live interviews. The radio news person who interviews you will be carrying a small tape recorder, and the usual practice is to record more conversation than can be used. The interviewer will probably indicate in advance what questions will be asked so that you'll have time to consider your answers. Ask for the questions if they are not provided. Unless asked to expand on your subject, you should avoid time-consuming details, rambling explanations, and complicated answers. In general, the questions usually asked are: How did you get involved in this research? What did you do? What did you learn? What are the implications? And what is the projected benefit for the average American? Be prepared to answer them. Avoid saying that it will only further research, without indicating the implications and benefits.

Reporters frequently interview by telephone, and conversations may be recorded by a device attached to the telephone. The interviewer should indicate when you are being recorded; however, it is wise to ask, before beginning the interview, if the conversation is being taped. The law no longer requires that a beeper be used on the line when a device is in operation, but federal regulations do require that you be notified.

the news conference

The news conference is a variation of the interview. It usually consists of news media representatives interviewing one or more scientific investigators. Ordinarily there will be a press officer in charge, and in addition to opening the news conference by introducing the principal people, that person is usually responsible for ending the conference when it appears that all pertinent questions have been answered. Like the best personal interview, the best news conference is relaxed and informal.

If you are the main speaker at a news conference, after being introduced, briefly make the points you consider important and then ask for questions.

the news release

All news releases must be made through the PAO. The news release is a traditional way of providing news media people with accurate information for general publication. It is just as valuable to you as to the news media.

Some scientists think a science news release is very similar to an abstract. Granted, they're both summaries, but that's where the similarity ends. An abstract is a distillation of findings. A news release is a digest; a good one contains sufficient background information and detail to support its main points. An abstract rarely contains enough data for a news release.

A good news release presents information clearly, completely, and concisely. Unlike a technical paper, which often presents its results and conclusions last, a science news release gives this information first because, from the viewpoint of the reporter and the public, it is most important. A science release should contain all the information an editor wants, and it often contains more than can be used. In such cases, the material is rewritten by a member of the news staff. To help ensure its accuracy, a news release should be written in inverted pyramid style, giving the most important results first and descending to less important detail or background information that can be cut off as needed to meet space or time limitations. Like most stories, the first and second paragraphs should concisely tell the who, what, where, when, why, and how about a news item.

Headlines are not the work of the reporter or the science writer. Headlines are written by a copyreader, whose job it is to pack accurate but attention-getting information about a story into a certain number of spaces. Many scientists consider the headline the greatest source of misunderstanding in contemporary science writing.

If you're planning to report on work that may have news interest, consider the advantages to you and to the Laboratory of having a release prepared in advance. Arrange for a discussion with your supervisor and a PAO representative to consider the news potential of your report. If the news potential is high and a release is recommended, PAO will work with you to prepare and issue the release. The PAO staff is equipped by training and experience to prepare and distribute news releases and, when warranted, to accompany you to scientific meetings to serve as a Laboratory representative to the news media.

One word of advice. If you believe that someone may consider your news release a covert attempt to gain publicity, remember that if your report has inherent news value, the news media will pick it up regardless of whether you have a release. Therefore, having one ready and approved increases the likelihood that your work will be reported accurately. As a matter of courtesy, make sure an advance copy goes through channels to your funding office, and give that office credit in the release. Remember, all releases must be made through the PAO.

scientific meetings

One of the busiest places at most scientific meetings is the press room. The press officer in charge greets reporters and science writers, briefs them on the program, arranges press conferences and interviews, writes news releases, supervises the clerical staff, and spends a great deal of time on the telephone trying to bring scientists and news media people together. The most important item in the press room (aside from the coffee pot, typewriters, and telephones) is a collection of the scientific papers to be presented at the meeting. Any scientist who is to give a paper should have some information about it in the press room—an abstract, a science news release, a popular press version, or copies of the paper.

The job of the press officer for a major scientific meeting begins many weeks or months before the meeting. After reviewing the abstracts, the officer will contact some or all of the speakers on the program and ask for copies of their papers or versions prepared for a general audience. If a paper is not available before the meeting and the subject has news value, the author may be asked to furnish a news release (usually 50 copies) for distribution from the press room.

News media people covering the meeting are alerted to story leads in several ways. The press officer may suggest certain research work considered significant or interesting. (Here, the officer often consults a committee of advisors from the organization sponsoring the meeting.) Reporters also scan abstracts on file or published in the official program, read news releases available in the press room, and occasionally pick up ideas from conversations with other writers.

Once the decision is made to go ahead with a story, the reporter will try to get a copy of the paper or its popular version and may ask the press officer to arrange an interview with the scientist. If more than one reporter asks for an interview, a press conference may be arranged. If you are presenting a paper or taking part in a panel discussion or other activity at the meeting, you should make sure the press officer or your PAO representative knows where you can be reached.

News media people are often attracted to panel discussions, invited papers, or papers delivered by scientists who have achieved recognition. Some research and development subjects are predictable favorites with the media. Among these are energy, medicine, defense, environment, and space. If you are going to report on work in any of these subjects of interest, you are likely to attract the attention of the news media.

One final point: if you are interviewed unexpectedly at a scientific meeting, then for your own records and the Laboratory's, draft a memo soon afterward to document the interview as accurately as possible, and send a copy to the Public Affairs Office.

the news story

It's really not surprising that scientists and news people frequently disagree over what is a good news story. Because of your scientific training, it's second nature to be modest about your work, to pause for reflection, to check and recheck, and to draw no conclusions beyond those your findings warrant. Because of his or her training, it's the reporter's instinct to try to make a good story even better. The unexpected twist and the surprise ending are what interest readers. This doesn't mean, however, that the news media person has no respect for facts.

On the other hand, some researchers may be a bit too egotistical or arrogant about their work or its importance. Don't oversell; your sale may come back to haunt you.

“The would-be popularizer (of science) is always confronted by the dilemma of comprehensible inaccuracy or incomprehensible accuracy, and the fun of his work lies mainly in the solution of that problem.”

EDWARD E. SLOSSON, Former Editor,
SCIENCE SERVICE

“Bad communication will drive out good communication just as bad money drives out good money. In other words, if reliable scientists do not communicate with competent journalists, then charlatans and more sensational media will fill the vacuum.”

...a quote attributed to DAVID LAFF
in SCIENCE

“Where science is accurate to ten decimal points, newspapers like to settle for round figures.”

ARTHUR J. SNIDER, Science Editor,
CHICAGO DAILY NEWS

a summary of what to do

In preparing to report your research findings, always consider the news potential. Be prepared:

- To talk with news people as well as the scientific community.
- To communicate as if you were giving a first talk on your subject to a high-school science class, avoiding or explaining technical terms, acronyms, and “buzz words.”
- To use simple analogies when possible.

In addition:

- Note that members of Congress (who vote on budgets) also follow the news.
- Advise your supervisor and PAO of all news inquiries.
- Prepare a mini-review, pamphlet, or information sheet before inquiries arrive from the news media. Then you will have something ready to transmit immediately, at least for background information.
- Know to whom you are talking; the news person’s name, the publication or news service, where the person can be reached, and the nature of the assignment.
- Be prompt in answering all calls from news media people.
- Remember that inquiries concerning the Laboratory’s position on some policy, future Laboratory activities, budgets, and legal and personnel matters are referred to the Director’s Office by Public Affairs.
- When being interviewed, give the facts, keep them simple, and stay alert.

- Present the information clearly and concisely.
- Give credit to colleagues.
- Be sure to give credit to your funding office or agency.
- Avoid off-the-record information.
- Avoid speculation on long-range payoffs when only preliminary data are available.
- Offer to review the final copy.

Cooperate with the news media. If your research is news, your story probably will be written, with or without your help.

and what not to do

- When handling news calls, don't pass the buck. If you are not the right person, call PAO, 7-7000, to find out who is.
- Don't try to dissuade news people from pursuing a story. In most cases they have assignments that must be completed.
- Don't by-pass your fellow scientists. When new research findings have not been reported to the scientific community or to your funding office, premature disclosure to the lay press is inappropriate.
- Don't insist on reviewing a story. News people are under no obligation to obtain your approval. You may, however, offer to check the draft for scientific accuracy.
- Don't expect science articles written for the public to have the detail, language, and precision of a technical report.
- Don't make statements you don't want quoted.
- Don't confirm or deny facts or results you know to be classified, even if they have appeared in the news by way of another source. A "yes" or "no" is a reference point.
- Don't downgrade competitive work (say, solar versus geothermal). With good results of your own, you shouldn't have to say anything negative about the work of others.
- Don't forget to send copies of news releases to your funding agencies. These agencies are interested in your work and aware of publicity value.

LALP-81-75
August 1982
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Produced by the Information Services Division.