



Shawn McClintock, Ph.D.
Career Development Committee 2024 Chair

Meeting the Press: Tips for Effectively Communicating Your Research

The 2024 ACNP Career Development Session focused on effective communication among scientists and the news media in order to improve communication and dissemination of scientific concepts and study findings to a wide range of audiences. The session included a panel comprised of the Career Development Committee Chair and Co-Chair, and panelists with expertise in scientific communication, editing, and journalism. Shawn McClintock, Chair, and Ryan Herringa, Co-Chair of the 2024 ACNP Career Development Committee chaired and moderated the session. The panelists included Dr. Cara Poland, Associate Professor at Michigan State University, Ms. Heather Boerner, an award-winning health and science journalist who has written for both mainstream and trade outlets, and currently is a writer and editor at the NIH National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), and Ms. Rachel Evans, who is the Chief of the NIH National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) Press Office. Dr. Poland provided the perspective from the scientist's viewpoint of working with the media, Ms. Boerner provided the perspective of the journalist working with a scientist, and Ms. Evans provided an overall perspective regarding the purpose, benefits, and strategies of collaborations among scientists, communications staff, and the media.

Dr. McClintock started the session by welcoming the audience and the panelists, highlighting how challenging it can be, particularly for scientists in the early and mid-career stages, to communicate science with a journalist, and noting the importance of the need to develop skills and abilities in collaboratively working with journalists to ensure that the correct message makes its way to the audience. Dr. Poland was the first panelist to speak. She provided a strong rationale for why it is so critical for scientists to work with journalists and media, and she provided personal experiences of her work with media that offered positive real-world examples of how to get the scientific finding out of the lab and into mainstream media so that it could reach the intended audience. Through both humorous and serious examples, she conveyed how important it was for the scientist and the journalist to work as a team to ensure that accurate and factual knowledge is put into the world.

Following the viewpoint of working with the media from the scientist's perspective by Dr. Poland, Ms. Boerner shared her perspective from the vantage point of a journalist. She shared her history of journalism working for different media companies, her love of scientific and health topics, and her journey of how she came to be at the NIH/NIDA. She provided many examples that showcased what a journalist needs in order to write the story for the media, and emphasized the critical importance that scientists and journalists need each other in order to translate the science from the lab to the world. Through speaking from her experience, she aimed to correct misconceptions that journalists were unhelpful, unempathetic, always looking for the scoop, and were always trying to catch the scientist off guard. Rather, she painted a portrait of journalists who were available, curious, supportive, approachable, and engaged. She ended by noting some tips on how journalists and scientists can work together, and encouraged the audience to work with journalists, to form collaborations and partnerships, and always ask questions rather than make assumptions.

Ms. Evans closed out the panelist talks by highlighting earlier points made by Dr. Poland and Ms. Boerner, and introducing new concepts focused on the wholistic aspect and mechanics of communicating with media. Given her role at NIH/NIDA and based on her experiences in helping to produce scientific communications across large organizations, she emphasized the importance of timeliness, organization, thoughtfulness, and preparation. She also encouraged scientists to work with their home institution, funder, and professional organization media teams to gain additional strategies and techniques to successfully work with the media, as well as to ensure media publishing policies and procedures are being followed. Ms. Evans concluded by providing tips and recommendations for working with media and trying to make sure that it is a constructive and productive experience.

Top 7 Recommendations for Working with the Media

1. Stay authentic and mission-driven
2. Focus on the translatable parts of your work that are accessible to a general population
3. Keep messaging simple, and explain things that may seem obvious to you (but may not be for a reporter)
4. Put your research in context – focus on why it matters for the audience the reporter will be reaching

5. Don't be afraid – most reporters are trying to go a good job. If they make mistakes, they want to know, and they want to hear it from you
6. Work with your press office/funder early and often to maximize impact
7. Preparation is key for fostering strategic communication – practice makes perfect!