

## Geographers and Journalists

### Got stories?

Geographers have wonderful stories, some that share information and others that relate the adventures of gaining new knowledge. But, although academic geographers are good at telling stories to captive audiences and to each other, many (including this author) have not yet developed either the voice or the practical network for capturing the attention of public audiences. We need to bridge that gap to increase our visibility and to steer the public perception of geography closer to reality (no, we don't spend the time between classes quizzing each other on the state capitals!). Given that public audiences contain potential students, employers, and decision-makers, helping them understand what we do should help us, too.

I've recently met with three journalists in my quest to better understand academic-to-public communications. What I've learned can be summarized in three points: reach out to journalists, offer them newsworthy stories, and be optimistically proactive.

### Reach out to journalists

Many of our institutions have Public Relations (PR) systems. Ask your PR person how he/she can help you. Generally, the PR office selects stories most likely to succeed, packages stories for public audiences, and contacts the media. Talking to a PR person has the added benefit of increasing his/her understanding of what geographers study. But don't stop there; contact reporters directly, too.

Most active reporting these days is done by newspapers, with other media frequently deriving stories from newspapers. Reporters are more often criticized than praised, and they always need new stories. You could begin a relationship with a journalist by congratulating her/him on a good piece or offering a story, succinctly summarized. Save your local reporter from having to go, yet again, to the courts for news. Provide the reporter with something visual. A picture remains worth 1,000 words, even to radio reporters.

A well-written press release can deliver information efficiently, but most land in the circular file. We academics tend to load the front end of a press release with names, titles, and affiliations, only presenting the core idea later. In contrast, the journalist begins with the core idea and only later (and minimally) mentions the source.

After establishing communication with a reporter, continue to send story ideas, perhaps quarterly. The reporter may hold a story for a later time when space is available. Remembering that the reporter, not you, will be telling your story. Be flexible about the result, which will differ from your own telling. Try to have "geography" or "geographer" appear.

### What's newsworthy?

Much of what seems newsworthy in academia (promotions, big grants, a new hire) doesn't begin to interest the public. Worse, the public may respond to news of a substantial research grant by questioning a tuition increase. News must have value for local people: something fascinating, information they can use, or something of local relevance.

We geographers pride ourselves on understanding context and culture. Here's the test: can we frame our work to correspond with public values? Take heart, newsworthiness can be enhanced by strategic packaging. One tried and true strategy is to link a story to the anniversary of a related event of general interest, like Rachel Carson's publication of *Silent Spring* or the opening of a local highway.

### Watch your language!

When we want the media to tell our story, we must watch our language. Some terms to avoid with the public are land use, stationarity, anomaly, uncertainty, discourse, GIS, geomorphology, Holocene, ENSO,

cryosphere, political ecology, physical geography.... Yes, it's going to be challenging, and yes, you'll need to define one or two terms you can't live without, but it's important to avoid terms that are not public parlance while, at the same time, maintaining the intellectual content. There's

a silver lining to meeting this challenge—learning to speak without jargon can lead to greater success in proposal writing, multidisciplinary research, and conversations with your mother.

### Be proactive and optimistic

The media are changing. Now we have wikis, twitters, and blogs as well as OpEds and classic journalism. Is blogging an effective way to launch your research results into the public domain? My informants prefer up-to-date websites and personal contacts. And, compared to a blog, a good website is more visible to internet searches.

My quest has revealed some good tips. Consider adding a line to a research proposal to pay a science writer. That worked well in another department on my campus. Consider taking, or encouraging students to take a science-writing course. Science writing, which encompasses social science as well as "hard" sciences, attracts individuals with backgrounds in science rather than in journalism; thus, geography students in a science-writing course can find themselves comfortably among other non-journalists.

What I've learned has changed me. I'm not ready for a long-term commitment, like those of Neal Lineback and Mandy Linebank Gritzner in their weekly *Geography In The News*<sup>TM</sup>, or Harm de Blij in his years with ABC's *Good Morning America*, but I'm ready to take smaller steps to make geography more visible. Please join me. ■

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