



# ACADEMICS AND THE MEDIA: FOUR PERSPECTIVES



## YOUR BEST SHOT: TIPS FOR A GREAT MEDIA INTERVIEW

So you want to become a “talking head” on the Discovery Channel or an “expert in the field” in the pages of *USA Today*? Read this guide to gain insights from experiences on both ends of the lens and pen: two academics who work with film media, and two print journalists who elicit pithy quotes from academic experts every day.

Fear not—the skills and savvy that make for a good interview experience can indeed be learned. Good interviews happen when you prepare your material in advance, put on a clean shirt, are courteous and professional, and share authentic enthusiasm for your work.

SBL and ASOR are committed to helping our members respond responsibly and well to the tremendous public interest in archaeology, biblical studies, and the ancient Near East. We hope this guide is a helpful step in that direction.

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# HOW TO TALK TO THE MEDIA:

## TIPS FOR SCHOLARS

Jennifer Howard  
*The Chronicle of Higher Education*

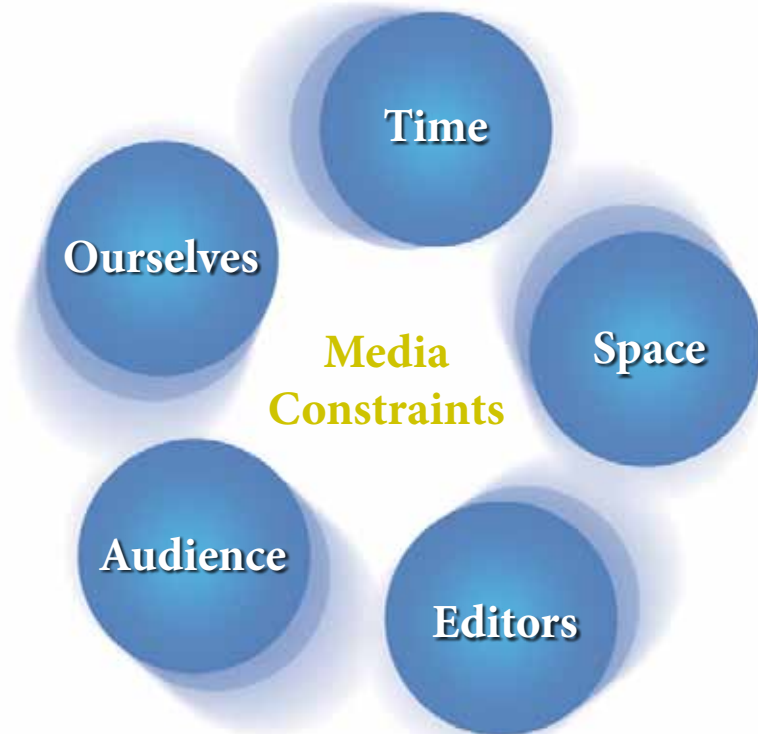
**M**y message is simple, obvious, and worth repeating: Journalists are not necessarily the problem. We can be a channel through which ideas make their way to a larger audience.

To make the expert-journalist interaction as smooth as possible, though, it helps to understand the constraints we work under, what we're looking for when we ask you to share your expertise, what you should know before you talk to someone like me, and how you can help me and my colleagues find you. (We can't interview you if we don't know you're out there.) This is not a complete list by any means, just some basics to think about.

First, what constraints are in play?

- **Time.** Deadlines, deadlines, deadlines! In the trade, we call this feeding the beast, and it's a hungry one.
- **Space.** I might love to write a 5,000-word story about your work. The paper may only have room for 500. I don't like it any better than you do, but that's life.
- **Editors.** I like to tell my editors that it's my job to get as much material into the story as possible and their job to take it out again. They love that. They're higher up the food chain than I am, however.

- **A general audience.** You write for your peers; I write for the senior scholar in the history department and the researcher in the chemistry lab and the grad student in comparative literature and the secretary in the provost's office and some random neighbor of mine who might pick up the newspaper or find an article online.
- **Ourselves.** It's not quite fair to say that journalists are generalists; we have our own forms of expertise. But I have a better grounding in some subjects than in others, and that may be reflected in the questions I ask you.



Second, what is a journalist looking for when she or he approaches you?

- \* Sometimes I want an overview of a subject. Sometimes I want an informed reaction to an event, discovery, or idea. Sometimes I'm after context: How important is this event, really? What does it mean? How much does it matter? What do we need to know to understand it?

- \* Always appreciated are lively quotes, enthusiasm, and passion for the work or the idea.

Third, what should you know before you talk to a journalist?

- \* What kind of story is the journalist working on? Is it a scene-setting overview, a quick-turnaround news story, an in-depth analysis? It's fair to ask if you don't know.

- \* What kind of media outlet is the journalist working for? Do you know the publication or show?

Again, ask or do some research of your own so that you have a sense of what kind of venue you're being asked to appear in. Don't make the mistake of treating "the media" as one animal; there are many species of us, and we function in some very different ways.

- \* Be prepared to have a long and complex conversation reduced to a handful of quotes (accurate and in context, we hope). See the note about space and length constraints above.

- \* Stay away from jargon or theory-speak. This is not the same as dumbing down your subject. Just remember you're not talking to a roomful of fellow experts in your field. A caveat: terms of art and expert detail are necessary and welcome, anything that gives the story context and flavor.

- \* The journalist's reputation is on the line, too. I don't want to get it wrong any more than you do.

- \* Most journalists do not pay for interviews,

nor will we show you the story before it runs or airs.

Fourth, how can journalists find you?

- \* Think about what aspects of your work may be newsworthy or of interest to an audience beyond your field. Be honest, now. Not every journal article merits a universal press release.

- \* Make friends with your campus news service. The good ones know when to pitch, whom to pitch, and how often.

- \* Look to book and journal editors you work with to help spread the word about nifty ideas, monographs, special issues, reports, exciting debates and controversies, and the like.

- \* Make use of Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and so forth as a way to share news (selectively) about what you're doing or to flag new twists and developments in your field.

- \* If you have a good tip or idea, get in touch with a journalist directly, but be judicious about it. None of us lack for email to read these days, and I have come to dread the epic voicemail pitches I sometimes get.

The bottom line is that talking to journalists does not have to be unpleasant or scary. The media can help your ideas and your research reach the wider world. To make the experience as painless as possible, do your homework, understand the constraints the reporter is working under, don't overdo the jargon, and don't be afraid to let your enthusiasm and your expertise show.

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# TV DOCUMENTARIES:

## PROCEED WITH CAUTION

Jodi Magness  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

### BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

Archaeologists who work in areas that have any intersection with the biblical world or texts are in a hard spot. On the one hand, they want to explore and explain their work to an interested public. On the other hand, the public has been primed not to trust scholars and to expect that archaeological finds must always have a punch line—one that either proves or disproves the Bible.

Add to this the rise of “amateur experts” who are perfectly happy to take your place in the interview seat should you decide a media project is academically irresponsible. The wonderfully democratizing aspects of the Web have a double edge, too: you must contend with opinions and ideas (sometimes attributed, other times not) that have never gone through the peer-review process and yet can still impact people’s perceptions.

I have found that doing media work—and I should qualify that by saying, doing documentary work produced by for-profit media houses—is surprisingly challenging. It is difficult to convey both the context we scholars take for granted and a snappy quote the producers will love. And chances are, after a 15-minute interview, they’re going to cut out the context and leave the snappy quote, because the medium they work in can’t allow for a 15-minute contextual set-up. So those are the some of the constraints you have to work with.

The following are some pieces of hard-earned advice I would give to any archaeologist (or scholar) who is considering working with TV media.

- 1 Do not agree to sign no-disclosure agreements.
- 2 If a reporter calls you to comment on something you have no knowledge of, remember that you can always decline to be interviewed. You do not have to answer questions on something you have not seen, read, or informed yourself about.
- 3 If you are not happy with the way your quotes were used in a production, or simply feel the need to rebut a piece of irresponsible work, write an editorial aimed at the nonspecialist. Send it to the Archaeological Institute of America, the SBL, ASOR, and anywhere else you think might post it. Put it on your website. Then, if reporters call you asking for your views, you can also point them to your editorial.
- 4 The popularity of biblical archaeology and the desire on the part of media productions to hype the “Is it true or isn’t it?” angle means that unethical, sensational, and factually unsound ideas and theories will be aired to the public. Then scholars are called on to comment, and we tend to end up looking like the bad guys, the nuancing naysayers. This “mopping up” aspect of being an expert can be a waste of time better spent on doing your research. But it also needs to be done.



5 Related to point 4 is a basic observation that scholars' values are often at cross-purposes with TV producers' values. They want to make money off of archaeology, and we don't. They want to validate personal belief, and we don't. This means that what we find interesting—say, that we can reconstruct the world of Jesus with a fair degree of accuracy—won't interest them. They—or rather, the public—want a piece of Jesus himself. The same goes for the exodus, Noah's ark, and so on.

6 Sometimes someone from a production house will contact you asking for your help with their research. They usually call at an early stage in production, and they sometimes call you several times, an hour at a time. While this may be flattering, this is time you are not spending on your research, and it can start to add up. Of course, you are not forced to talk to anyone, but it might be wise either to email them a bibliography on the subject or to set a consulting fee for your services (see below).

7 If you still want to go ahead and do media work (and I recommend that you do, but with your eyes wide open), remember to talk in a way that is easy to understand, the shorter the better. Be aware that television media (in my experience) tend to prefer talking heads who speak with American or British accents and that being a woman has an appeal to producers whose roster of interviewees are mostly male.

## WHAT CAN OUR PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS DO?

- \* ASOR, SBL, and the AIA can better coordinate their responses to media splashes on biblical topics. Swift, strong, and unified statements from all three organizations on their websites would be a responsible action that safeguards the professional conduct and values of archaeology and its related disciplines.

- \* Create permanent media committees (as ASOR has done) that will be proactive as well as reactive, to ensure that archaeological work is presented accurately and responsibly to the public.

- \* Offer workshops, training, and advice to our members at our annual meetings or through online education (resources such as this one or webinars).

- \* Draft policies and guidelines for our organizations rather than leaving individual members to deal with media crises on an ad hoc basis.

- \* Establish hourly consulting fees to charge for-profit media companies. This might encourage producers to do a larger amount of homework before they contact us for that phone consult.



### SOUND BITES

Because the public gets much of their information about the Bible and its world from television (and now Internet) media, we must learn how to communicate in those media effectively. This means learning how to present complex issues and controversies in a sound bite. Although we may likely be quoted out of context, the alternative is to abandon the stage and allow others less qualified to represent the public face of archaeology.

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# TEN COMMANDMENTS IN TEN MINUTES:

## HOW TO TALK TO THE PUBLIC VIA JOURNALISTS

Marcia Z. Nelson  
*Publishers' Weekly*

The phone rings, or you get an email. It's a reporter on deadline seeking comment or wanting to pick your brain at length as he or she begins working on a story about your area of expertise. Don't frame your thoughts "for the media." The media are just that: the intermediary between you and the public. So, speak to the public. The following do's and don'ts will help you communicate what you know with clarity.

### 1. SIMPLICITY AND CLARITY ARE THE ALLIES OF PRECISION.

Simplicity does not equal dumbing-down. It means that, in order to reach your audience (which is not the interviewer, by the way), you'll want to avoid the "-isms," the "-ities," and the "-ics," as in "textual criticism," "multivocalities," or "hermeneutics." Remember your audience. Twenty-eight percent of Americans have a college degree, so kick into your teaching mode when you speak and think of your audience as your undergraduate 101 course.

### 2. AVOID ACADEMIC JARGON (SEE NUMBER 1) AND BE CONCRETE.

Use examples when you speak; they help the reader get a handle on your subject. Journalists also love numbers and facts—not a flood of them, but one or two are good.

### 3. ALLOW JOURNALISTS TO DO THEIR JOB.

Journalists may not be experts in your field, but

many are smart—and know how to ask good questions, research a topic, fact-check, and write well—all of which will help your work get out to the public. If you spend time second-guessing them or nit-picking their questions or terms, this creates an element of antagonism that isn't helpful to the interview. And don't lump good journalists in with the much-maligned "media."



### 4. AVOID MURKY THINKING, AND DON'T SPLIT HAIRS.

Let the material breathe; don't constantly rebut your interviewer's questions with responses that begin, "Well, not exactly...." Don't use jargon or hair-splitting expressions such as "it's complex," which can suggest that you haven't thought the matter through or that you have nothing concrete to give the audience.

### 5. PRACTICE AND PREPARE WELL IN ADVANCE.

Practice your "elevator speech," your one sentence that summarizes what you do.

## **6. SHOW YOUR PASSION AND ENTHUSIASM.**

The people who show genuine enthusiasm for their topic are more engaging and likely to reach an audience.

## **7. OFFER FOLLOW-UP AND AVAILABILITY.**

Journalists are pressed for time and often on tight deadlines. If you follow up an interview with related information or your own availability for further discussion, that's a plus.

## **8. KEEP YOUR WEBSITE UP TO DATE.**

It's difficult for a journalist to find you and know your research interests and affiliation if this is not current on your website—or if you don't have a website.

## **9. NEVER SAY “NO COMMENT” (UNLESS THERE IS A LEGAL ISSUE).**

You can, however, choose not to answer a certain question. Just be pleasant about it so you don't come off as stonewalling or uncooperative.

## **10. BE NATURAL.**

Journalists enjoy and will come back to scholars who are at ease in conversation and whose humility and enthusiasm for their subject are apparent.

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Marcia Nelson has worked for newspapers, been published online, is the author of three books, and has trained journalists about religion for the Religion Newswriters' Association.

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# THE “CAMERA FRIENDLY” SCHOLAR:

## ESSENTIALS FOR GIVING GREAT TV INTERVIEWS

Robert Cargill

University of California, Los Angeles

I began digging in Israel in 1999. No one cared. I had earned an M.Div. and was educated in biblical studies. No one cared. I was working on my Ph.D. at UCLA. No one cared. I was teaching religious studies as an adjunct at Pepperdine. No one cared. Then Nicole Kidman hired me to personally tutor her in Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. All of a sudden, documentary companies cared.

I built trust with some producers, and I became a credible scholar who was (and still is) committed to educating the public as well as talking to other scholars and contributing to cutting-edge research. I was a centrist, always positive, gave freely of my knowledge when asked, and never spoke negatively of other scholars to producers. I tried to promote other scholars as much as I could, knowing those recommendations might one day come back to me.

In many ways, the academy and television are the same. It helps to know the right people and have great recommendations, and sometimes you catch a break; but in the long run, it is your talent and goodwill that sustain your reputation. However, TV producers look for an additional element not so common in academia: “camera-friendly” personalities.

It probably didn’t hurt that I was twenty years younger than everyone else on most shows. Producers liked my youth because it helped them reach a younger demographic of viewers.

Based on my experiences in television, I have assembled a few tips on how to give a good interview.

### GETTING READY AND BEING PREPARED

#### *1. Ask for the questions ahead of time.*

Ask producers to email you the questions so you can prepare concise and tailored answers. If they refuse to send you the questions ahead of time, decline the interview. Never set yourself up for an ambush interview.

Do your research. By this I do not mean original research, but check your facts. TV documentary makers want to know consensus views and

need simple, running commentary, not the latest thing you thought of this week. Don’t get lost in the details, but try to have some clever lines with supporting details ready to go.

Bring notes to the set and keep them on your lap to refer to in between takes. You know what the interviewer is going to ask, so after he or she asks the question, look down, figure out what you’re going

to say, look back up, and say it confidently and succinctly.

The producer can tell if you came prepared, just as you can tell if a student came prepared to your class. So be prepared, and ask for the questions in advance.





## **2. Ask for standard compensation.**

Don't be afraid to ask for compensation for your time, even if it's your first interview experience. Standard compensation ranges from \$100 to \$300 for a couple of hours of on-camera time. Be confident. Ask as if it's assumed, and you'll get your price.

## **3. Don't dress like a "scholar."**

Wear something nice. Don't wear the most drab, threadbare, or coffee-stained clothes you own. Get a haircut. Iron your shirt. Pretend it's a job interview. Bring a change of clothes and let the producer choose what he or she wants. Don't be afraid to go without a tie or even a coat.

Most important, never wear green, white, stripes, checks, or logos! Stripes and checks cause the image in the camera to flicker, while plain white shirts and greens can cause "green screening," which is the technique used to superimpose one image over another (think of the weather segment on the nightly news). Finally, visible logos (e.g., Polo, Lacoste) are bad because the producer has to pay fees to the clothing company if the logo is displayed. Browns, blacks, blues, and tans work well with TV.

## **THE INTERVIEW**

### **4. Rephrase the question at the beginning of your answer.**

Remember that the TV audience will never hear the interviewer's questions, so you should repeat the question at the beginning of every answer.

For instance, if the interviewer says, "Why are the Dead Sea Scrolls important?" you should not begin your answer with, "Because they give us a unique glimpse of Judaism that was previously unknown to us." Rather, you should begin your answer by restating the question: "The Dead Sea

Scrolls are important because they give us a unique glimpse of Judaism that was previously unknown to us."

## **5. Use multiple takes.**

If you are really not comfortable with your interview statement, you can always say: "Actually, could I say that again? I stumbled there on a word." Or, "I think I can say that better." It's just as important for you to say exactly what you mean as it is for the producer to get a good take of you saying it. If you feel you could say it better, ask for a retake.

## **6. Remember that you don't have to answer every question.**

As the on-screen talent (and as a scholar), you are the expert. Don't stretch to answer questions you aren't prepared to answer or, even worse, aren't qualified to answer. To be sure, if you attempt to answer questions you aren't comfortable with, those are the comments that will end up in the show. When asked a question, it's okay to say, "You know, I don't have a comment on that" or "That's out of my area of expertise."

## **7. Popularize but don't sensationalize.**

There are ways to make your comments more accessible to nonspecialists without sensationalizing. Some TV producers want you to say something in a sensational way because it "sells" better. A common joke among scholars appearing in TV documentaries is hearing a producer ask, "Could you say that again, but this time use the word 'mystery'?"

Don't use big words when simpler ones will do, but don't sacrifice the nuance of what you're



Wear something nice for TV interviews that would reflect what you might wear to a professional job interview. Do not wear green, white, stripes, checks, or logos, as they may well interfere with filming or incur advertising fees for the producer.

saying. Imagine that you are about to make a very important point to your freshman class. Don't assume anything. In fact, try to explain the terms you are using within your explanations. Couch definitions within your comments. For instance, say, "The importance of eschatological reversal—that is, the idea that in heaven you will experience the opposite of whatever you experienced on earth—is central to the theology of the Gospel of Luke."

#### **8. Couch your qualifiers within your statements.**

More scholars have been burned in postproduction than in any other place in the documentary-making process. That is, after the interview, the producers and the editor cut up your interview to use only the best parts. Often, some producers will cut up portions of what you've said to make you "say" what they wanted you to say, even if you didn't mean to say that. This is the chief fear of most scholars and the biggest deterrent to most scholars agreeing to appear on TV.

The trick is to speak so that it is difficult to cut up what you've said. It is also important to state on camera exactly what you're not saying as well. When your interview is transcribed (a process that is usually done by an outside company or a technician), if you state clearly what you do not mean to say, it is less likely that your words will be edited in a contrary way.

One way to do this is to speed up and change the pitch of your voice when making important statements. Also, couching your qualifiers in the middle of your sentences makes them difficult to edit.

For instance, do not say, "While there is very little evidence to support it, I guess it is possible that the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, just as the

Bible says they did." Why not? Because this sentence can be easily shortened by eliminating the first half of the sentence so that your resulting comment says, "The Israelites crossed the Red Sea just as the Bible says they did."

Instead, couch the qualifier in the middle of your sentence by saying, "It is possible that the Israelites, even though there is very little evidence to support it, crossed the Red Sea, just as the Bible says they did."

In this way, it is more difficult to edit out the middle of this statement in postproduction, especially if you emphasized some of the words and thereby changed the pitch of your voice in the middle.

Now, it is possible that the interviewer will ask, "Would you repeat that, but this time say it a little more confidently, and try to

use the word 'mystery'?" Here you have the right to say, "No. I said it exactly the way I wanted to say it. The truth is, there is

very little archaeological evidence to support any exodus from Egypt. Having said

that, I must concede that it is possible—however unlikely historically—that there may have been an exodus from Egypt." This forces, or at least strongly encourages, the producer to use your statement as you said it.

#### **9. Practice your delivery.**

Practice makes perfect. Stand in front of a mirror and practice speaking. Now, before you say to yourself, "That's the most vain thing I've ever heard," remember back to the first time you gave a paper at SBL. Remember how you not only wrote a fantastic paper but also practiced every word, remembering to underline the words you planned to intonate and emphasize so that every syllable was perfect.

**The trick is to speak so that it is difficult to cut up what you've said. It is also important to state on camera exactly what you're not saying as well.**

Remember that TV is a visual medium as well as an aural one. Many scholars have heard papers at SBL that, while perhaps quite informative, had unintended soporific qualities! You absolutely cannot give TV viewers the chance to change the channel when you speak. Delivery is key.

Don't sensationalize or be overly dramatic, but be persuasive. This might feel a bit artificial, but it is essential that you emphasize your main points with your face as well as your voice. Remember to smile with your eyes as well as your mouth. As you get better, you'll find your own voice and style and use them to your strength.

#### ***10. Remember that you're on a small screen.***

In a movie shown on the big screen, every slight movement and every glance of the eye is exaggerated. One need not move much to make a point. This is the drama of the big screen: big screen, little movements.

However, most documentaries are on the TV, which is a much smaller screen. Subtle movements go largely unnoticed. This means that you have to be almost exaggerated in both your inflection and your movements.

If you watch an interview after you've given it, you'll often notice that those times where you thought you were being overly emphatic are barely noticeable. This means that you have to be very emphatic with your hands, your voice, and your head when you speak. A small screen requires larger, exaggerated movements in order to look natural on TV.

For practice, watch effective speakers when they give papers at SBL. The good presenters all know this. They deliver a paper at a tempered pace and with wonderful inflection. They use their hands and their heads to emphasize certain points. Try to emulate this when on TV.



Don't sensationalize or be overly dramatic, but be persuasive and remember: Smile with your eyes as well as your mouth.



#### ***11. Land the plane.***

Do not ramble. This is perhaps the biggest problem with scholars. They speak in long, rambling, sentences, thinking out loud as they go. Instead, when on TV, speak in sound bites. You're only going to get one, short shot to speak, and you want it to be concise, meaningful, and clever.

When you're about to finish a sentence, use your vocal intonation to signal that you're ending your thought. Don't say, "So that's why it's important to cite your sources ... um ... because that way people can check your references to make sure that what you're saying is true." Instead, say, "And that's why it's important to cite your sources." Pause. "If you cite your sources, others can check to make sure what you've said is true."

Note that in the second take, I broke up my comments into two, distinct bites that can easily be separated if needed. And, I landed the plane at the end of each sentence.

Remember to end each sentence on a solid vocal note, to pause, and to maintain eye contact with the producer asking the questions after each

sentence. This gives the editor in post-production plenty of room to edit your comment cleanly.

## OTHER ADVICE

### ***12. Create a media site on your private web page.***

If you want to be selected, you must apply. This is true for finding a job and for appearing on TV documentaries. One effective way to make yourself available to documentary producers is to create a media website. Some of your colleagues may tease you, but a media site will increase your visibility and accessibility to producers and journalists. Just as you post your academic C.V. to attract and impress potential employers and tenure committees, you should create a “media C.V.” to display your strengths to potential documentary producers.

Additionally, you can increase your online presence by blogging or using Twitter, Facebook, and other social networking media. As libraries and bookstores continue to transition to digital media, and as online publications are gaining in reputation, the Internet is quickly becoming the main way to find experts in a particular field. An online media C.V. may include your academic publications and areas of expertise from your academic C.V.

### ***13. Finally, establish trust with producers.***

We must remember that trust is a two-way street. While there are plenty of reasons for scholars to be skeptical of TV producers, not all documentary makers are out to make you say something they want you to say. Some documentary makers have earned reputations for acting unethically and unprofessionally toward scholars, but this is not true of all producers in the industry. The quickest way to check to see if a producer is legitimate is to check his or her website. Do you recognize any of the shows he or she has produced? The other quick way to check is to contact colleagues who have ap-



peared on TV to see if they have an opinion about a particular documentary maker.

Appearing on TV can offer great exposure for you and for your university. TV producers know this. Likewise, documentary makers usually try to make more than one documentary, so it is in their best interest to be fair and professional when dealing with the scholars who are essential to their work. Most documentary makers, while they may have a script in mind, are truly attempting to discover and learn as much as they can from you, the scholar, during the interview. If you show them a little trust, they will return that trust by treating you fairly in their final product.

I hope these tips will guide you on your way to a better experience when talking to the media.

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