

Reaching “an audience that you would never dream of speaking to”: influential public health researchers’ views on the role of news media in influencing policy and public understanding.

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Abstract

While governments and academic institutions urge researchers to engage with news media, traditional academic values of public disengagement have inhibited many from giving high priority to media activity. In this interview-based study, we report on the views about news media engagement and strategies used by 36 peer-voted leading Australian public health researchers in six fields. We consider their views about the role and importance of media in influencing policy; their reflections on effective or ineffective media communicators; and strategies used by these researchers about how to best retain their credibility and influence while engaging with the news media. A willingness and capacity to engage with the mass media was seen as an essential attribute of influential public health researchers.

Introduction

Public understanding of research and its implications is founded primarily on news coverage (Valenti, 1999). While there is a long-standing debate in media and political scholarship about whether news has strong or weak effects on a wide variety of outcomes (Bryant & Zillman, 2008) there is abundant evidence that news media can strongly influence public perception about the salience of issues (McCombs, 2004), the severity of public health threats (Young, Norman, & Humphreys, 2008), and affect community health behaviors (Abroms & Maibach, 2008; Chapman, 2007; Noar, 2006; Wallack & Dorfman, 1996). The media also influence political discourse and action, with discernible impacts on policy (Abroms & Maibach, 2008; Brewer & McCombs, 1996; Tan & Weaver, 2009). Alan Otten, for 44 years a reporter at *The Wall Street Journal*, observed that news reports can produce *“public outrage (or policy maker outrage) that forces new regulations and laws or tougher enforcement of existing ones. Ten-thousand-watt klieg lights turned on a situation focuses the minds of policy makers very fast”*(Otten, 1992). George Lundberg, former editor of the *JAMA* agrees: *“In our society public media are irreplaceable as a mechanism for moving a problem to a solution”*(Otten, 1992).

Three quarters of Australian politicians we interviewed for a related paper on how politicians identify expertise placed great importance on media profile, with media presence sometimes considered as commensurate with expertise: *“... the media is used as a proxy for being an expert in the area.”* For one political advisor, it was the only means of identifying experts: *“I have absolutely no idea how I would go about identifying someone if there wasn't an obvious expert prominent in the media”*(Haynes et al., 2012).

Perceptions of the nature of research are also affected by media coverage. As Nowotny et al. argue, *“The media have a dominant role in shaping, and reshaping, public images of science”* which, in turn, conditions public trust in science (Nowotny, Scott, & Gibbons, 2001). There is also evidence that news coverage can enhance awareness of research in academic circles and increase scientific citation (Chapman, Nguyen, & White, 2007; Phillips, Kanter, Bednarczyk, & Tastad, 1991).

Accordingly, governments and funding bodies have long emphasized the importance of publicly funded researchers utilizing media to report their research findings and contribute to public knowledge and policy debates (Department of Innovation Industry Science and Research, 2010; House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology, 2000; U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Science, 1998; Wolfendale Committee, 1995). The US Senate Committee on Science called for scientists to combat the *“widening chasm”* between science and the community and to recognize their *“responsibility to increase the availability and salience of science to the public”* (U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Science, 1998). The UK's Science and Technology Committee of the House of Lords argued that *“...direct dialogue with the public should move from being an optional add-on to science-based policy making and to the activities of research organisations and learned institutions, and should become a normal and integral part of the process”*(House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology, 2000). The Australian Government endorsed an expert committee's report examining ways of promoting research innovation, stating *“To fully realise the social, economic*

and environmental benefits of our significant investment in science and research, we must communicate and engage the wider community in science”(Department of Innovation Industry Science and Research, 2010). These calls for greater public dialogue about research and its social benefits are increasingly echoed in the research community (Hendrix & Campbell, 2001; Orr, 2010; Parry, 2002).

The media are the major player in this dialogue. Yet many researchers remain ambivalent about media engagement and some are *“deeply distrustful”*(U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Science, 1998). The values implicit in Sir William Osler’s 1905 advice that doctors should not *“dally with the Delilah of the press”*(Osler, 1905) remain alive today in academic research circles, particularly in disciplines *“where practitioner or liberal educational values counsel modesty and impartiality”*(Orr, 2010). Concerns are often expressed about the impropriety of researchers actively engaging with the media to publicize their research and, particularly, to advocate for policy—an activity said by some to *“politicize”* science (Weigold, 2001). It seems that Merton’s idealized ‘dispassionate scientist’ (Merton, 1973) is contending with increasing demand for active community accountability and engagement.

Wilkes and Kravitz’ study of first authors whose research had received press coverage found that, while most authors were satisfied with the coverage, a substantial minority thought that media attention *“gives the impression that the researcher is seeking publicity”* and *“creates jealousy among colleagues”*(Wilkes & Kravitz, 1992). Such concerns were echoed in a major study undertaken for the Royal Society in which 20% of British scientists believed colleagues who appeared in the media were *“less well regarded”* by their peers – seen as a *“selling out”* or seeking *“self publicity”*. To this minority, public engagement was something *“light”* or *“fluffy”* and *“done by those who were ‘not good enough’ for an academic career”*(People Science & Policy, 2006).

The potential pitfalls of media engagement are well documented, focusing on concerns about sensationalized framing and the misrepresentation inherent in reducing scientific and conceptual complexity to sound bites (Orr, 2010; Parry, 2002; Schwitzer et al., 2005). Consequently, the literature is replete with instances of poor relations between researchers and journalists (Maille, Saint-Charles, & Lucotte, 2010; Valenti, 1999). For example, 60% of British researchers want to engage with politicians about their research, but far fewer want to talk to journalists (31%)(People Science & Policy, 2006), despite common knowledge that politicians are voracious consumers of news where they daily encounter expert and public opinion directly relevant to their portfolios (Lenton, 2007). There is also a generalized perception among researchers that they are ineffective public communicators (Gething, 2003; Weigold, 2001). The Australian government’s *Inspiring Australia* report noted that *“Communicating science to audiences other than their peers is not a performance expectation for most scientists, and many find it difficult to explain their work and its value in lay terms. Few scientists are properly trained in media or public communication skills.”*(Department of Innovation Industry Science and Research, 2010) Consequently, manuals, guidelines and training courses for public health researchers abound on how to more effectively use news media (Metcalf & Gascoigne, 1998; Nelson, Brownson, Remington, & Parvanta, 2002).

Nevertheless, many researchers engage often and effectively with the media, believing media coverage of their work has significant benefits (Gascoigne & Metcalfe, 1997; Gething, 2003). Independent health experts are the sources most trusted by journalists covering health issues (Leask, Hooker, & King, 2010): ‘experts’ are the second most frequent category of news actor in Australian television health news stories, after those experiencing health problems (Chapman et al., 2009). Yet many researchers remain ambivalent about media engagement despite strong political encouragement to do so (Department of Innovation Industry Science and Research, 2010).

Previous studies on how scientists communicate with the media have focussed on understanding factors associated with this engagement, particularly challenges and barriers (Besley & Nisbet, 2011; Dunwoody & Ryan, 1985; Gascoigne & Metcalfe, 1997; Peters, 1995; Poliakoff & Webb, 2007). These include confidence in talking to the media (Poliakoff & Webb, 2007), the reaction of colleagues (Gascoigne & Metcalfe, 1997) and concerns about the accuracy of reporting (Peters, 1995). A major omission in the literature about media engagement is any analysis of influential public health researchers’ experiences. There has been little research on why and how such researchers engage in public discussion of their research and policy and the strategies they use to overcome these barriers and challenges. In this paper, we address this neglect by reporting the views of 36 of Australia’s most influential public health researchers, as ranked by their research peers.

Methods

We interviewed 36 Australian researchers in six fields of public health (alcohol, illicit drugs, injury prevention, obesity, skin cancer and tobacco control) about whether and how they sought to influence public health policy. These researchers were voted by their research active peers as the six “most influential” Australia-based researchers in their respective fields.

Interviewees were asked broad questions on the role of researchers in influencing public policy (for example, *What role do you believe researchers should have in relation to public health policy?*); the nature of researcher influence (for example, *In what ways do you consider the researchers you nominated to be influential?*); and strategies to achieve influence (for example, *What strategies, if any, have you used to increase policymakers’ awareness or use of your research?*). Follow-up questions in each of these categories were used to prompt consideration of media engagement. For example, *Why do you think the media choose to ask you?* Questions were designed to elicit views on four overarching topics: 1. How do ‘highly influential’ public health researchers perceive the role of media in relation to research dissemination and policy influence? 2. What role do they believe is appropriate for themselves and other researchers in relation to media engagement? 3. What strategies do they use in their media engagement in order to influence policy? and 4. What institutional constraints or supports affect this process? Full details of researcher selection, the voting process, the development of the interview schedule and the interviews are reported elsewhere (Derrick et al., 2010; Haynes et al., 2011)

Interview transcripts were entered into NVivo 8 (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2008) and sentences containing explicit media-related terms (e.g. “media”, “journalists”, “TV coverage”) or inferring

the media’s role in informing or changing public perceptions (e.g. “the public wants to hear what the experts have got to say”) were selected as ‘media-related’. These quotes were coded (by SC) into the four overarching categories that framed our questions above. A second phase of coding (by SC and AH) revisited the raw data to confirm the categories and identified clustered themes within each category. These are shown as subheadings in the results. We provide illustrative examples throughout.

A 31 statement Likert-scale questionnaire was developed from the major themes identified across the coded data to quantify participants’ views (Table 1). All 36 interviewees were invited to complete the survey online, and 35 did so.

Results

Table 1 shows responses from 35 of the 36 peer-voted influential public health researchers to a post-interview on-line questionnaire.

Table 1: Peer-voted influential researchers’ (n=35) attitudes to media, advocacy and policy influence.

Statement	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
Public health researchers have a duty to influence policy and practice	37	49	11	0	3
Public health researchers have a duty to increase public awareness of their work	37	49	14	0	0
I generally respond to media requests to promote awareness of my research	57	40	0	0	3
I often initiate contact with the media to promote awareness of my research	6	51	23	17	3
I see being available to policy makers and the media as an important part of my role	60	37	0	0	3
It is not appropriate for me to express my opinions about public health policy	3	3	0	37	57
Advocacy compromises the integrity of researchers	6	15	27	41	12

The vast majority of public health researchers believed they had a duty to influence policy and practice and increase public awareness; respond to media requests; viewed availability to policy makers and media as part of their role; and believed they should express opinions about policy. Responses were mixed about initiating media contact and whether advocacy compromises researchers' integrity.

1: Perceptions of the media

The media were regarded as peerless in their power to influence and as a potentially problematic but vital channel for researchers who wished to advance research-informed policy. The sheer reach of media surpassed any academic forum for research dissemination: *"I spoke on [a radio program] last night for example, and there probably would have been, at minimum, 100,000 people listening to that which is an audience that you would never dream of speaking to in a scientific conference."* Television was seen by some as the most powerful medium: *"If you want to see change, the television screen is really the way to do it. The television screen of the mid 20th century has changed more health policy than the Guttenberg revolution of the mid 14th century has or ever will."*

The ability of the media to affect policy agenda-setting was of paramount interest to most researchers. Media coverage of health issues had 'brought the community along' with new ways of thinking about public health: *"without...the softening up that the media did, it [tobacco control legislation] would not have been as acceptable as it ultimately was to the community"*. This critical mass of public interest and support could then provide the catalyst for policymakers to back proposals:

...doing things that will attract media attention and getting good media coverage is another way of getting policy into action indirectly by preparing the community for things or creating a demand in the community that then starts to be felt politically which ultimately leads then through to action in the political sphere as well as more widely in the community.

Researchers' major concern was about possible misrepresentation caused by the media's insistence on simplification resulting in inadequate contextualization of data or commentary; because of lazy and factually incorrect reporting; or media "spin"—deliberate efforts to selectively frame the meaning of research, often for sensationalist purposes.

Nevertheless, few researchers reported being misrepresented and most said they were generally satisfied:

I have had the odd occasion where there has been poor reporting or reporting of something I've said, or a trivialization of something I've said. That stuff happens, but overwhelmingly my views about the way in which the media relate to my work have been that it's been a positive force. It's enabled a lot more people and

decision makers to be able to understand the research that I've been doing and to start thinking about problems in a different way because of it.

2: The role of researchers in relation to the media

Table 1 shows a clear majority (86%) agreed that Public health researchers have a duty to increase public awareness of their work and a duty to influence policy and practice. With two exceptions, media engagement was seen as integral and vital here: *"If you're trying to influence policy, which is really what we were trying to do, we had to put information into the public arena."* Accordingly, most researchers embraced media to further awareness and uptake of the implications of their research. For example,

Every grant application that I've ever filled in [asks] "How will you disseminate the results of your research?" I just don't put, "I will write scientific articles." I talk about what I intend to do with the research when it comes out, which is put it on websites, to sometimes issue press releases, to forward copies to people I judge who may be interested in it, in government, in NGOs, in the media... I actually make room in my life and my career to spend time to talk about that research.

Several researchers acknowledged they were *"reluctant participants"*, uncomfortable in talking to the media, but did so on principle: *"I hate it, but I do it because I know I have to [laughs], and I should do it. But one can't be great at everything .. I'd rather be behind my computer writing a paper."*

Many interviewees explained that they had nominated some researchers in our survey partly because of their strong media presence, and several suggested that their colleagues had nominated them as an influential partly because of their media profile: *"I do a lot of work in the media, so that gives a sense of influence."* Nevertheless, there was awareness of negative reaction among a minority of colleagues in the research community who regarded the media's predilection for simplification and spin as unacceptable: *"There are a lot of people who are involved in research who don't like the media, don't like dealing with them, and who probably are suspicious of researchers who do."*

Some interviewees had encountered colleagues who questioned the motivation of media-engaged researchers, seeing their promotion of research as an unseemly, *"ego-driven, empire-building"* activity. These critical colleagues dismissed those who engaged with the media as *"self-promoting"* or *"show ponies"*, terms *"designed to circulate the view that proper science is science which does not seek to promote or publicize its findings"*. As a media-engaged researcher explained:

Your colleagues will criticize you for...being a media nymphomaniac - because if you appear in the media that's the inevitable accusation: it's that you're driven to this by some kind of psychological need to have your face in the media all the time.

3: Strategies used by influential researchers

All but one of our interviewees regularly engaged with the media because of the “*huge advantage*” it provides in “*getting your research out there*”. In many cases, this had led to an advantageous media profile that, once established, became almost self-perpetuating with the media returning regularly and the researcher gaining further opportunities to promote research: “*They see that you can articulate an issue and so you tend to get called and that kind of snowballs into becoming the ‘go to’ person.*”

Establishing this relationship was seen to be dependent on several attributes.

Managing simplification

Given that the average duration of comments on Australian television news is 7.2 seconds (Chapman, et al., 2009), being “*media-friendly*” meant “*being able to collapse your complex important findings into the briefest sound bites*” and “*knowing what to pick. What is it out of your research that the media is actually going to be interested in?*”

The measured and qualified language of science was seen as having little place in media commentary: “*The media’s not interested in people who say on the one hand and on the other hand and on the third hand and on the fourth hand. Academics might be interested in that sort of nonsense but no one else is.*” The challenge, therefore, was for researchers to find ways of truncating research, while maintaining its integrity:

Any simplification inevitably involves a loss of truth so it’s a difficult balance, but on the other hand if you say $E=mc^2$ but there are 1000 caveats then no one’s going to listen to that. So you have to find ways that are proper, reasonable, fair and accurate, but that are nevertheless simplified enough for the media to carry them.

There was also a role for researchers to elevate policy debate when it was threatened by over-simplification: “*when debates were polarized—it was fairly clear that there was a misleading simplification of what the issues were—I try to get a more nuanced picture out there which at times involves undermining the claims made by people on either side of the argument.*”

Also, several noted the importance of modern information technology to provide research detail that the media so often omitted: “*The advent of the web has made it a lot easier to live with simplification in the media and then put all the complexity on the web.*”

Those who most often appeared in the media were generally confident about their ability: “*It’s not boasting to say I had the gift of the gab, and I was fluent and I didn’t um and ah much...that sort of skill was quickly honed in the media.*” But a few interviewees noted that not all the researchers who had been nominated as highly influential had mastered the skill of the sound bite: “*X [an eminent researcher], is not ever going to be that media person because he mumbles. He’s just shocking with media, just shocking... it’s qualifiers and cross-qualifiers and it all ends up on the cutting room floor.*”

Framing

Using sound bites effectively not only provided the simplification that media coverage required, it also helped to frame key research findings and implications (Entman, 1993; Lakoff, 2004), rather than allowing journalists to decide which points were most salient and how they should be presented. Researchers who were able to find accessible but accurate ways of conveying research findings were regarded as highly successful and influential media operators: *“He can spin things really well. I don’t mean that in a negative way – he is somebody who has the most fantastic media style, is across the issues...explains the issues endlessly to the media, to the general public and to the bureaucrats in ways that people can readily understand.”*

Having an opinion

Some interviewees had encountered colleagues who believed researchers should just *“stick to the facts”* in interviews. This position was echoed by just two researchers who agreed that *“It is not appropriate for me to express my opinions about public health policy”*. They argued that extrapolating policy implications from data was outside a researcher’s remit: *“I think my public face while I am wearing a researcher’s hat is to provide the data and to ensure that the data that are being discussed are the right data and are accurate.”* However, the overwhelming majority (94%) disagreed, arguing that the public expects experts to go beyond reciting and clarifying facts to provide commentary, to *“translate”* data and explain its meaning for policy: *“They want to see what professor so and so says about it”* because *“people always want to know what the policy implications are”*.

Breadth of knowledge

Contact with journalists was often prompted by publication of research papers but, more frequently, journalists would approach trusted researchers for commentary on others’ research or on news issues relevant to their expertise. For this reason, it was important to be able to talk beyond the particulars of a given piece of research and to have an extensive understanding of one’s field: *“I think that people who are being interviewed regularly in the media need to have that broad perspective. I think you need to be a big picture thinker.”*

Being available

All but one of our interviewees regarded ‘being available’ to the media to be a component of their professional role. Consequently, these researchers all agreed with the statement that *“I generally respond to media requests to promote awareness of my research”*. Thus being *“assiduous in courting the media and being available at reasonable and unreasonable times when they contact you.”*

Some had come to know journalists personally and often assisted them behind-the-scenes: *“I made a decision to try and respond as quickly as I can so a lot of them know me quite well, will ring up and just chat and I’ll give them a lot of background to things or I will tell them somebody else to go to.”*

Several spoke of the symbiosis between researchers’ need to gain public and political attention for their issues and journalists’ need for reliable and credible sources to help them provide authoritative stories. This occasionally led to openings for researchers to suggest stories: *“There*

were a few journalists who had me on their books and if it was a quiet news day they'd give me a call."

Discernment: 'good' and 'bad' media

Trust in the integrity of the media was important, with several researchers speaking of *"those parts of the media that we're happy to deal with"*, but also particular individuals and organizations they deliberately avoided: *"there's a group of journalists who we quite regularly interact with and deal with, and then there's a group who we don't."* This selective engagement was widespread and, in some cases, was built on negative experience:

You quickly learn that there are some journalists that are just interested in a sensational story and they want ... "Would you prepared to say X?" regardless of what the facts might be. They don't want the facts to get in the way of a good story. So there's certainly some journalists we will and won't deal with having had experience with them previously.

Managing one's media profile

Although more than half said they often contacted media to promote their research, all were judicious in this, what they agreed to talk about and how they presented information and themselves: *"I have been very calculating about what I comment on and what I don't comment on."* They cultivated a media presence that would ensure there was *"some credibility behind what I am saying"*:

"If you are seen by the community as a wise person who happens to know about research...then you can build community confidence in your opinion. So I know that I've got to be a bit thoughtful and careful about anything I say to the media because I want to retain that sense that if people see me they would say, "Ah, that's her, let's see what she's got to say".

A small minority were willing to engage in polemic and saw that this as part of their appeal: *"I've been prepared to be fairly outspoken and critical.. So that gives you a bit of a profile, and so the media, if they're looking for that particular point of view – particularly if you're prepared to say something that's a little bit controversial, like me."*

Delegating

Those who felt less adroit in communicating with media stressed it was important to work with policy advocates in non-governmental organizations *"who really understand the research results"* and could *"make better use of them"* in a public role: *"It's passing it into the policy advocates, so giving a good briefing to all the policy advocates and they go off and do the work. They're far better fast talkers than we are."*

4. Institutional capacity and support

Researchers were divided on academic institutional support for research-related media-engagement. Many pointed to the lack of encouragement inherent in traditional academia which focuses on *“teaching and research rather than service to the community or being a public intellectual”*:

None of this gets counted in an academic’s workload or output. It is something that individual senior researchers, in Australia at least, have tended to take on for themselves because they are passionate about public health. Not because they get paid for it.

But others remarked that this neglect was fading fast, with universities highlighting and rewarding their media-active staff and requiring researchers to keep records of media appearances for institutional profiles: *“The sort of mentality that I’m talking about ... ‘Don’t do anything to publicise your research’, it’s almost evolving away from that in leading research universities ... They encourage their staff to engage with the community and with policymakers.”* This ‘evolution’ had progressed to such an extent in some universities that some of the most media-engaged researchers were promoted as peer role models: *“If you go to the faculty website...there is a page where it says ‘featured academics’. I am one of them. I am probably featured because others understand that I embody that approach to my research and that’s acknowledged within the faculty as something that they wish to encourage.”*

Institutions could provide practical support too, in the form of media training and support. Several interviewees pointed out the benefits of media training, often supplied by in-house staff, and there was a widespread view that having dedicated media officers was *“incredibly important”* for soliciting and managing media contact, preparing releases, and assisting journalists behind the scenes.

We also had a media officer who was very, very good...at establishing credibility. So we were the first port of call frequently for media comment. It didn’t always get in the media - a lot of what we did was background briefings on issues and trying to close down silly stories.

In particular, media officers were skilled at working alongside researchers to manage the central tension in media-engagement, that of balancing *“sexy”* presentation with accuracy:

When we come to do press releases of the results, the media officer downstairs will have a first take on it and I will say, “No, you can’t say that. That’s wrong.” So we have this iterative process where she’ll make it sound sexy, but it’s correct as well.

Discussion

Those interviewed were voted by their peers as most *“influential”* in their six respective public health fields. As such, their views may not reflect those of a wider cross-section of Australian public health researchers. But as peer-acclaimed influential researchers, their accounts of the role of the media in their influence are arguably more instructive than views of less influential

researchers. Almost all of the 36 influential researchers were positive about their media engagement. They believed it allowed their research to percolate into public and political awareness, and promoted not only their own reputations as “go to” experts, but also strengthened the profile of their teams and institutions and helped set the parameters of public discussion and policy agenda-setting.

Scientists with training in communication are more likely to participate in public engagement (16) yet in this group of researchers, training did not emerge as a strong theme. Other studies involving interviews with scientists have also found that specific training courses were not necessary (Poliakoff & Webb, 2007) and that media engagement is training in itself (Pearson, Pringle, & Thomas, 1997).

While almost all of these peer-rated influential researchers recognized the importance of media engagement, they were also sensitive to concerns about its inherent constraints, the dilemmas posed by differences between journalistic and academic cultures and the reputational risks from an injudicious embrace of media celebrity. The major concerns were the news media’s insistence on brevity and simplification, and the resultant “*dumbing down*” of complexity, and intolerance of inconclusiveness in encapsulating commentary within sound bites. Other studies have shown these constraints are perceived by scientists as making communication with the media potentially fraught and thus a barrier to engagement (Davies, 2008). This group of researchers appeared to have developed strategies to overcome these constraints such as interacting with media workers that they knew and trusted. To most, these concerns were offset by the judgment that to absent oneself from the media was to almost guarantee the irrelevance of one’s research to public and political debates about health policy.

There was widespread awareness of the disdain held by a minority of colleagues in academia about those with high media profiles. This replicates early research (Wilkes & Kravitz, 1992). and is important to consider when finding ways to promote and encourage more media contact by researchers. A previous study of Australian scientists examining impediments and incentives to communicating through media (Gascoigne & Metcalfe, 1997) found that inexperienced scientists were concerned about unfavourable reactions from colleagues but more experienced researchers did not report any jealousy. However, there was also a suspicion that in the “*ego-driven world of the academic researcher*” in which “*people are out to make reputations*”, criticism of researchers with successful media profiles may be envy from those whose work was less publicized.

Overall, the opportunity that media engagement provided for researchers to contribute to research-informed public awareness and debate was regarded not only as appropriate by most of our influential interviewees, but as a critical aspect of their professional duty to advance public health. It seems these researchers recognize that the nature of media coverage is shaped, in part, by those who initiate stories, meaning that researchers can not only generate media interest in public health research and research-informed policy, but can also set in motion the framing of such stories and influence their effect on public health policy (Champion & Chapman, 2005; Dorfman, Wallack, & Woodruff, 2005).

The belief that engagement with media is part of an academic's duty has been shown both qualitatively (Dunwoody, Brossard, & Dudo, 2009) and quantitatively (Tsfati, Cohen, & Gunther, 2011) to be a predictor of media involvement. Thus an important avenue for motivating researchers in public health to increase their engagement with the media may be to promote the belief that it is part of their role in undertaking research. All felt that the media was an invaluable mechanism for achieving this and showed good understanding of the power of media in terms of reach and for influencing policy change.

In conclusion, a willingness and capacity to engage with mass media was seen as an essential attribute of influential public health researchers by most 'influential' Australian researchers. Most of these researchers were comfortable in performing this role and made themselves available to the media to comment on their own research and that of others in their field, and on matters of public health policy relevant to their expertise. This was done with awareness of the limitations of the media and of the difficult path that must be followed in making policy recommendations without being seen as a policy advocate who ventures beyond the evidence or selects evidence to advance a particular policy agenda. In the astute words of one interviewed researcher "There are many ways of engaging in the debate and most effective way in the 21st century is using the media, so you have to.. accept the limitations of the media and yet still throw yourself into it. "

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