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Interview Questions

"Interview me for television?"

Suggestions from Two Science Filmmakers

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The phone rings, you explain your research to an inquiring mind, then the question is popped, "Would you be willing to give us an interview for a television show?"

You're flattered. You picture yourself on countless television sets throughout America. The lights, the glitz, the glamour of being a media star! But before you let your ego ascend too high in the heavens, there are a few aspects of reality you might want to keep in mind.

The experience of having a documentary film crew come interview you can range from a jolly good time with very friendly folks to a logistical headache that can literally leave you alone in the dark at the end of the day (or well into the night).

Although most film crews are generally conscientious and considerate, there are nevertheless many details of production that get overlooked or go astray. We have compiled here a list of suggestions for you to keep in mind before, during, and after your interview based on our experiences, as well as stories we've heard.

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

Importance – you might want to begin by asking yourself (and getting a clear answer) how important it is for you to give this interview. Relating your research to the general public is generally very commendable

and a decent thing for a scientist to do. If you agree with this, then it's up to you to be somewhat of a good sport and be prepared to deal with the impositions usually demanded of a film crew. If you can buffer your expectations a little, then you'll be pleasantly surprised when they finish early and leave you wanting to spend more time with them.

Schedule – this is perhaps the most important element to consider when an interview is first arranged. It is an unfortunate aspect of film production that everything seems to take longer than expected. If a crew is sharp and NOTHING GOES WRONG and the cameraman doesn't get too creative with the lighting, then they may be able to get in and out of your office in an hour or two. But this is rarely the case.

About the only good way to work around this is to block out twice as much time for an interview than what the producer has requested. Also, last minute rescheduling is a common affliction of film crews not to be taken personally. In fact, don't be surprised if they call at the last minute to postpone the interview to a different day. Your flexibility will be greatly appreciated by the producer.

Your Office/Laboratory – if the crew wants to interview you in your office or laboratory then they are probably going to want to do some rearranging of the furniture. If you have anything delicate, you might want to put it away or tape off certain areas. Although most members of a film crew are agile, you might as well be braced for the possible bull in your china shop. Also remember their lights can put out large amounts of heat. In an instance one of us witnessed (R.O.) a 10,000 Watt lamp pointed into a glass cabinet inadvertently melted a pile of video tapes in plastic cases.

Power – this is a classic problem (and what we meant about leaving you in the dark). If the production is just a little digital video shoot, they probably won't need any more power than you would use for a few computers. But if it's a full scale film shoot, they could show up with 10,000 Watt lamps that will roast your circuits before you can say, "Please don't plug –"

Ask the producer about power needs and be aware that this is one of the most common problems of film crews – the tendency to overload circuits. It can be very serious and cause major damage.

Your Appearance – a major film shoot will probably have a hair and make-up person for you, but smaller scale productions will not. This can be a touchy subject. Unfortunately film and video are visual media, and how you look ends up being important. While you don't want to get carried away with being overly vain, it is reasonable to have either a mirror handy, or ideally, a good friend present to give you a last look before the camera rolls.

Your Clothing – you might also ask the producer what clothes you should wear (especially your shirt) in terms of style and color. If the producer seems uncertain, you might want to bring several options with you, especially since the setting in which you are interviewed might be changed on the day of the shoot, once they start lighting your office or lab. The basic idea with shirt colors is to avoid patterns (just go for a solid color) and wear a color that will stand out from whatever is behind you. If everything in your laboratory is white, you will look best if you wear a colored shirt. Also, in general, loud colors don't work so well.

Sound – you would be amazed how important "clean" sound is for interviews. Yes, there are things that engineers can do to erase the sound of peristaltic pumps in your lab or to mask over the sounds of people talking in the halls, but every extraneous sound recorded presents one more problem for the production. You will be doing the film crew a huge, huge favor if you can work on sound control for them in advance. Figure out how to turn off those pumps, and the air conditioner, and politely inform the folks in the next office about the need for quiet during the interview. Just try sitting in your office or lab for a few minutes and listening – you'll be amazed how much you hear (and most of it the sound engineer doesn't want to hear).

DURING THE INTERVIEW

Preparing what you'll say – there are a number of things you can do to prepare yourself for the actual interview. First you have every right to ask the producer for the questions he/she intends to ask you. The producer may or may not provide this (hoping to maintain some level of spontaneity) but it is always worthwhile to ask. Even if you are not provided with the exact interview questions, the producer should brief you as to what he/she wants to cover during the interview.

Try to think of simple ways to describe your work, your techniques, your results. One liners are always helpful especially if you can incorporate analogies accessible to the layperson. When the interviewer asks a question, it is a good idea to incorporate the question into your answer. Remember that the viewer does not have the benefit of hearing the question. Doing this will decrease the number of takes to which you'll be subjected and make whoever edits the film much happier.

During the interview – the interviewer will generally place him/herself to the left or right of the camera. You can look directly at the interviewer and answer questions accordingly taking care not to look into the lens of the camera unless you are told otherwise. The most important thing is to act natural and show your enthusiasm for your subject matter. Presumably you are doing science because it inspires you. Don't be afraid to show that you truly enjoy what you are doing and are inspired by your findings. Your enthusiasm is one of the main reasons the film crews are there.

Props – if your work lends itself to props, by all means have them handy. Share them with the producer beforehand and explain how you might employ them.. The producer may have some ideas for how best to employ the props during the course of the interview.

Multiple takes/Exhaustion – bear in mind that to get the interview just right may involve multiple takes. Don't be afraid to just ask for a breather, take a quick walk grab some fresh air and attack the situation fresh. A five minute break can do wonders for clearing your head and you have every right to request it.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Follow-up – be sure to get contact information from the crew. It is well worth your effort to arrange a time when you can review the script and offer whatever corrections need addressing. This last point is critical and may mean the difference between an interview of which you are proud and one that makes you want to turn tail and run.

It is generally said that, "film is a collaborative medium." A good film crew will be ideally looking for just such a collaboration with you. They will seek your input, listen to your suggestions (within reason), and generally strive for the old motto of, "if you don't look good, we don't look good." With a little awareness on your part you will almost certainly find them delightfully surprised with your preparedness. The result will be a piece of film or video that you will be eager to share with everyone you know (until, like old home movies, they ask you not to play it any more).