

# Working with the Media

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## Introduction

The number of media enquiries to COSRT and its Members is increasing. These guidelines are intended to help Members give due consideration to any project they may undertake and to avoid the pitfalls, while enjoying the enormous benefit of media activity.

## Should you work with the media?

If you are media-wary or media-negative, the answer is probably no; you may well reinforce your own negative expectations. Plus you may not be able to build the cooperative relationship with the media that will allow you to influence them in a positive direction.

Equally, if you are doing media work solely because you are flattered or for personal advancement, then you may be wiser to step back.

However, if you feel you have something to offer the debate, by all means accept, even seek out, media projects and avail yourself of some training to support this venture.

## How can you decide whether or not to work on a media project?

Which projects should you accept? There are many out there that are worthwhile; others are more suspect. However, here are some key questions to ask when first approached:

- Who are you being asked to work for - newspaper, website, programme? Are they an outlet you are happy to deal with? What is their tone and approach?
- What is the topic you are being asked to work on? Do you have solid knowledge, are you able to deliver accurate comment, is the topic sufficiently uncontroversial that you will be able to give useful coverage?
- Are you asked to give a particular viewpoint; is this a viewpoint you are happy giving?
- Does the project raise any personal ethical issues for you? And will involvement in it contravene the professional COSRT Code of Ethics?
- Who are you being asked to appear alongside - or in opposition to? Will this pairing be beneficial, or unhelpfully confrontational?
- Will you get sufficient airtime/exposure to genuinely and usefully contribute to the debate? Or if not, will this appearance lead to others that may allow you to make a difference?
- Will your media exposure have any negative impact on your current service users? On your family, friends, colleagues, professional links?

- Is any personal information about a current service user likely to be disclosed? If so, this will require their explicit consent.
- Is the project on a deadline and if so, do you have time to do it?
- Where are you being asked to work and are you able to do it? If for print, online or local radio, the appearance may be on your own phone, but for national radio and television could be at a radio/television station or production company studios far from home. Are you prepared to travel? If so, will the company pay expenses - most don't unless it is for an extended project.
- Will the outlet mention COSRT (or your services)? If not, what benefit will you get: a fee... the experience... the learning? Is it worth it?
- Are you permitted to check and approve your work before it is used? Having such approval is rare, often due to the short deadlines. Therefore, you may need to keep your boundaries very firm when doing the work so you never say or do anything that could be misinterpreted. Over time it is possible build up relationships with media staff whom you know you can trust not to abuse your input.
- Will you be able in practice to challenge the media for whom you are working, on areas of concern? If necessary, are you prepared to walk away?

## Working on single/short interviews/comments?

These are likely to be for magazines, newspapers, websites and radio or television news programmes.

The first approach you get will probably be by phone or email; the interviewer will likely offer their name, the name of their publication/programme, the topic on which they want you to comment, their deadline and a contact number. It is polite to respond to them as soon as possible as they are often on a deadline of a few hours (if being asked to give an interview for an extended programme, documentary or series the deadline may be longer, perhaps a few weeks). If you can't/won't do the interview it is useful to offer the name of someone who might be able to - COSRT can often help here with another contact.

For this kind of work, payment is rare, although BBC national stations will sometimes offer a small fee or travelling expenses. Equally it is rare for any contract to be offered as the amount of work (sometimes just a few minutes) is so small.

## How to prepare

- Consider all the issues listed in the above section 3 about whether to work on any specific media project.
- Then find out about the audience, their age, interest range, and how they will hear your words; then tailor your comments to them. What is compelling for the audience of a drive-time programme (commuters, broad age range, will hear the programme once, and when distracted by driving) won't necessarily interest the audience for a monthly fashion magazine.

- Check who else is being asked to comment, or for radio/television who else will be in the studio. Research them - are they likely to oppose you? If so, note the points they may make and have your strong but calm arguments ready.
- Ask to be given questions in advance, though do not expect the interviewer to keep rigidly to these questions.
- For your answers, typically what's needed is a few core comments; less is more and the simpler your message, the better you'll convey it. Decide on your messages, examples, anecdotes, facts/statistics - usually no more than half a dozen - then cut them back to the absolutely shortest note form, headlines you expand on. With tricky topics it's often useful to also note what you don't want to say or comment on.

## How to deliver

- During any interview, whether for print or broadcast, keep answers short and pause after every few sentences to allow questions. This is a conversation not a presentation.
- Make sure to state your main message in the first answer you give, even if you must veer slightly away from the question actually asked! That way you are sure you have covered your message, whether or not the interviewer gives you another chance - they often don't!
- For print or online comment, remember that the journalist will be taking notes, so speak slowly. If you feel the journalist has not understood what you said, check by asking them to repeat your statement back to you.
- For pre-recorded radio/television comment, if you feel that you have expressed yourself badly, simply stop, ask for the question to be repeated, and answer again; the presenter will keep your better answer and edit out your worse one. For live radio/television comment, if you feel you have expressed yourself badly, correct yourself, keep calm and carry on; in the interests of good broadcasting, the presenter is unlikely to correct or challenge you.
- For pre-recorded broadcast comment, your answers may be heavily edited. So check whether it's necessary to include the question you're asked into your answer (in case the interviewer's question is edited out). Also, try to refer to your key message in almost every answer (in case they only use one of your answers and edit the rest). Make sure that any comment will not have a negative effect on COSRT, service users or colleagues if taken out of context.
- Make sure throughout, and particularly at the end of, your interview to repeat COSRT's name and contact details, or any other relevant contact details.
- Ask for details of when the article will appear in print or online, or when the interview will be broadcast, so you can review your work as it appears.

## Troubleshooting

- If someone asks you a question you can't answer, don't comment inaccurately or bluff. Better to divert the question onto what you do know, with a comment such as - "But the real issue here is..."
- If you suddenly dry up or blank during an interview, don't panic. For print, online or pre-recorded radio or television you can simply say so and take your time to think again before answering. If you blank on live radio or television, ask the presenter to repeat the question so giving you time to think; the interviewer will be motivated to help you recover your thoughts so as to create a good interview. Very few are, or want to be, Jeremy Paxman!
- If feeling pressured into having an opinion you don't agree with, or into making a controversial or provocative comment, then for print, online or pre-corded broadcast, simply refuse to answer and state clearly that you do not want to be quoted on that topic. For live broadcast say what you want to say instead of what was asked; there is not a lot they can do to challenge you!
- Remember that you already have huge existing expertise in staying calm, focused, boundaried and not 'hooked in' to the dynamics. This expertise is called 'being a therapist'.

## Working in a consultancy/presenting role

This is likely to be for extended radio or television programmes or series, often documentary or 'reality'. This is a different challenge as your involvement is likely to be more significant and more time-consuming.

The first approach you get is likely to be by phone or by email inviting you to phone. This call is essentially a first 'interview' where the researcher asks for your ideas on the topic to see if your they fit with the direction of the programme. However, at this stage both the programme and its direction may be unclear to the researcher just as much as to you, so their thoughts may be vague. However you need to

- Consider all the guidelines listed in the above section 3, about deciding whether to work on a project.
- Check whether the project is a 'pilot' (to be offered to radio/television channels in the hope of a commission) or is it a commissioned programme with a definite transmission slot? This may influence whether you decide to give it your valuable time.
- Check whether the programme sits in a series and if so what the other programmes will feature and how that will sit with your intended participation.
- Check on which station or channel it will be shown.
- Ask to see the programme proposal (sometimes also called the programme 'treatment' or 'development')? This is the document sent to channel commissioning editors, outlining the proposed content and tone of the programme. If seeing this is not possible immediately, ask for details of content and tone to be sent to you. Discover what programmes the production company, the

producer and team have made before. This will give you a more accurate picture of the quality that the company is used to delivering.

You'll probably then be asked to input your expertise and opinion on the programme topic and direction. It may seem as if you are giving something for nothing - and sometimes you are, albeit for only a half hour - but you can influence the direction of the programme by giving informative and ethical comment. Programmes have been rethought (or cancelled) in the face of opposition from experts such as you!

If the programme proceeds, then you may be contacted - often months later - for face-to-face meetings and a possible 'test interview' recorded on video; these help guide the direction of the themes further.

At this stage, it's worth checking how they see your role: perhaps screening participants for involvement in programmes, being part of a programme, providing live or indirect comment on a programme or participants or offering counselling and support to participants before, during and after the making of the production.

## Being hired

After this, the production company - along with the channel who has commissioned the programme - will make a decision among the (many) experts considered.

If they don't choose you, it may have nothing to do with your abilities. Logistics, costings, the 'mix' of people in the programme, the 'fit' of the presenters to its tone and content will all have to be considered. Try not to take 'rejection' personally.

If they do choose you, then it's wise to once again formally check certain aspects of your involvement, which may well have changed as the programme has developed.

- What will the programme now be?
- What will your role be? In particular, would you be expected to work with 'real' service users. As stated, for further guidance on the ethics of this, see section 6.
- What amount of work might be involved?
- What will you be paid?
- What does your contract specify? For extended pieces of work you should have a contract, and you should get this legally checked or hire an agent who will do so.

In addition, check whether your own employment contracts and codes of conduct permit you to do the work. Many employers grant consent when they are reassured that you will speak as an individual (rather than an employee or representative) and about issues generally rather than the organisation or their service users.

It is also always wise to give the media company a copy of the COSRT Code of Ethics and Practice. This is helpful to them and for you; you can refer them to this document if they suggest an action that might compromise

you. A responsible production company will be pleased to have this document, as it will help inform their project.

### Doing the work

Preparing and delivering extended media work is in one sense so complex that simple guidelines are useless; you learn on the job. Conversely the ground rules are much the same as for short interviews: know your audience, know your key messages, keep your boundaries strong. It will also help to get as much external support as you can:

- Do a media training course
- Ask the programme producers to coach you
- Find an agent to stand between you and the production company in any disputes

### What if your work involves 'real life' individuals or couples?

There are particular challenges in features/programmes that involve 'real people'. Here are some Ethical Guidelines; if you feel they are being breached, you need to challenge that with the programme producers and if necessary withdraw from the project.

COSRT does not consider it ethical to facilitate introductions to existing or former service users. It is the responsibility of the production company to source participants and to ensure that they are suitably screened for this role.

COSRT advises Members to exercise caution in programmes that involve the public, and to ensure that there is suitable clinical assessment and aftercare of any participants. If you are working with participants, ensure that you keep their needs at the centre of your concern at all times and adhere to the same ethical guidelines that would apply to service users in other contexts.

**Informed consent:** COSRT advises Members to insist that all potential participants be given information about the range of potentially negative consequences on their lives should they agree to take part, including loss of privacy for themselves and their family members and the stresses on individuals and family relationships should any be portrayed in ways they find humiliating, embarrassing or that don't reflect how they see their situation.

**Children:** The needs of children require particular consideration. Even if they are judged old enough to give consent, they will need help to consider the possible consequences of participation on their family, school and social relationships, including bullying. If they are deemed too young to give consent, those considering consent on their behalf may need help to consider the potential consequences for them during production

and after screening. These shows can be repeated years after completion and the consequences can be far-reaching.

Screening processes: It's vital that members of the public undergo a clinical assessment to ensure their robustness for the project. Those who are psychologically vulnerable, including those with a history of mental health difficulties, and those who may be unable to understand and appreciate the implications of taking part, should be excluded. These participants may need after-care if deemed unsuitable to participate.

Editorial procedures: What procedures are in place to protect both the participants and the therapist should they become unhappy about any aspect of the filming procedure? Can they turn the camera off, have time out, cease participation, delete information they do not want transmitted?

After care: Participants should be offered the opportunity to talk in confidence to a suitably trained therapist or similar professional before and during the production and once the programme has been screened; there should be a clear understanding of how long this will be available.

Therapist. The therapist him/herself should ensure that their supervision needs are taken into account and also documented in any contract. Ideally a supervisor with media experience should be used.

## Finally

To learn to do media work well, it's vital to think back over every interview/appearance you do and question how you could improve it. Questions to ask are:

- What did I do well?
- Did I get my message across?
- Did I present and influence ethically and helpfully?
- Did I maintain my boundaries and standards?
- What could I do better next time?

Media work can be very helpful in spreading useful values through society, and in raising the profile of COSRT in particular and of therapy in general. It can also be hugely rewarding and professionally fulfilling. If you do get involved, then as well as giving of your best, enjoy!

If you would like further help or advice on any project please contact:

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