

Taking the arid zone to tv: what is required to get a story based on the arid zone on air

Paul M.A. Willis

Catalyst, ABC TV, 700 Harris St, Ultimo 2000

ABSTRACT

The need to present scientific research to a popular audience is becoming increasingly apparent. Presenting arid zone research in the media, particularly on television, raises a number of difficulties that are best solved through planning and preparation. Awareness of the logistical problems that will be encountered as well as the procedures required for putting together a story for television is the most effective element in producing a finished story that both the field researchers and the television crew will be happy with.

Key words: Arid Zone Research, television, media, Catalyst

Introduction

This paper seeks to explain how scientists conducting research in arid regions can best approach the media with the intention of promoting their work in the popular media. Many of the points raised here are equally applicable to bringing any biological research to the attention of the media. However, the harsh conditions of the arid region, coupled with their remote locations, present specific problems to a media producers. And, because I work in television, the issues discussed here have a strong slant toward promoting scientific research for television rather than print, radio or online although many of the basic issues discussed here are also applicable to those media.

Why Bother?

Perhaps the first question that any researcher needs to ask when contemplating contacting the media with a view to promoting their story is "Why am I doing this?"

Firstly, be aware that working with the media to produce a story means a sizeable commitment of your time and resources, commodities that are in very restricted supply during most field seasons of research in the arid zones. These matters will be elaborated on later. But any researcher must also ask a broader, more philosophical question of why their research deserves a showing in a public forum such as our program *Catalyst*.

In an earlier paper (Willis 2003) I detailed some of the justifications I put forward when considering publicity for my own crocodile research. Essentially these can be reduced to three powerful arguments. Firstly, I have such a naked joy at discovering details of the natural world through my research that I just want to tell the world! I know that it is not exactly everyone else's cup of tea but, when I describe a new species of crocodile or find a specimen of a marine reptile with its last meal still perfectly preserved in its stomach, I'm so enraptured by that discovery that I want to share it with as many people as are prepared to listen. What we do as

research scientists, and why we do it, is exciting stuff that the rest of the world ought to know about.

Secondly, I would gladly perpetuate an ethos installed in me as a postgraduate student by my supervisor Mike Archer. Much of my research is paid for through the taxes of the general public. It therefore follows that they have a right to know how their money has been spent.

The third reason for promoting research in the media for public consumption stems from the previous point and the ever-tightening funding situation for scientific research in this country. When the crunch comes and your funding is reduced or even taken away, you have a more powerful argument to make for restoration of those funds if the public already knows who you are and what you're up to. While this philosophy is far from a certain panacea for regaining lost funding, it at least garners public awareness about the importance of your research and presents a case for its maintenance. Conversely, no one is going to go into bat for the future of a line of research that they have never heard of. A public face for the research you conduct is an insurance policy against future adversities.

Another issue to consider as a motivation for approaching the media is the fact that the media is the best way of taking your research to a broad audience. We are trained at communicating complicated ideas in a way that is accessible and engaging to the general public. We have the infrastructure to reach a wide audience. *Catalyst* has, on average, just under a million viewers per week. That is about as broad an audience as you can hope for in Australia for a science story.

The size of the audience is particularly important with respect to research with a broader agenda. If your research carries a more important message about conservation, the protection of a particular environment, the impact of water and land usage patterns, or a whole range of other socio-political issues, then the broadest possible exposure is required to sell that message.

Another, somewhat surprising reason for taking your research to the media is the current Australian Research Council grant decision structure. As I understand it, around 10 per cent of the points available for an ARC grant application are based on public interest and benefit. A story in the media, particularly on television, can be and has often been included in this section of people's ARC applications. I'm personally aware of two cases where scientists have included tapes of stories I have filmed with them as part of their applications. In both cases they got the grants and claim that the *Catalyst* story accounted for the extra points that got them over the line.

While these are some of the most compelling reasons I can find for approaching the media with your research, I cannot emphasise too strongly that the "Why should I?" question is perhaps the most important step that you will take in the process of exposing your research to the general public. I have covered too many stories in the past where it is obvious that the researchers have not thoroughly considered this question. All too often researchers approach the media because they have been compelled to do so by the university or museum media unit, or they have been leant on by a well-meaning manager to go public. Their reluctance and lack of commitment to the process of making television (or any of the other form of media) are difficult to disguise and they can too readily appear as weak or dull when the story goes to air or is published. The TV camera is the greatest lie detector ever invented. If you go in front of it without a solid commitment as to why you are there, the audience will spot your reluctance in a moment and the power of your story will be destroyed.

Step one is to know why you personally want to approach the media and, if your heart is not in it, don't bother.

The approach

Let's now assume that you have thought through the reasons why you want the media to cover your research and you have decided to approach a media outlet with your story. How do you go about this, and what can you do to increase the chances of your story being picked up?

Firstly, choose your target carefully. Would your story best be told through a newspaper, magazine, radio, television or online, or perhaps a mixture of some or all of these? Who is it that you want to tell your story to? If it is a national audience then a national TV program such as *Catalyst*, a radio program such as *The Science Show*, or a newspaper such as *The Australian*, will be your best choice. Maybe the people you need to target are just the people of the State you are working in, or even just the local area. You need to consider the reach of the media outlet you are approaching and match that to the audience you want to reach. However, beware; chances are you will only get one bite at the cherry. If you hope to attract national attention and you also give the story to a State-based media outlet, then a national media outlet may reject your story. Similarly, it is unlikely that a national newspaper and a national television program will carry the same story. You will probably be asked to commit to one media outlet and

to participate in an embargo so that whoever does invest the time, effort and finances in covering your story gets an exclusive. You should carefully consider such matters with the Media Officer at your institution and collaborate with him/her to develop a media strategy.

Personally I would recommend national television for the sorts of stories that come out of arid-zone research because it has the highest profile. This high profile assists in getting your message across. For example, every Thursday night one in 20 Australians sit down in front of their television to watch *Catalyst*, which is then on-sold to cable networks all around the world. If you want 10 million Americans to know what you have been doing in your arid-zone research, come to *Catalyst*!

More importantly, because we are part of the ABC, we have a very important demographic. Viewers tend to be more affluent, better educated and also more socially influential. While we cannot offer the biggest audience on Australian television, we can offer one that is well worth talking to.

Catalyst is also the only show on the block. There is no other science magazine program, not just in Australia, but in the world. Even the BBC doesn't produce science magazine programs any more. While technology magazine programs are starting to appear on other channels, the producers are not interested in stories from the biological sciences. The only programs with a similar science focus to *Catalyst* are a couple of children's environment programs currently screening on the commercial channels. You may well consider these programs because you think that your research will be of particular interest to a younger audience, and that is a perfectly laudable decision. However, be careful if you also want to take your story to an adult audience, which the ABC offers. We have turned down stories simply because they have already appeared on programs such as *Totally Wild*.

I would also highlight the importance of taking science stories to a dedicated science program such as *Catalyst* rather than news and current-affairs programs such as *The 7.30 Report*. At *Catalyst* we understand the kinds of peer and social pressures that science researchers find themselves under. Most of us have some background in science, and we are familiar with the academic/institutional scientific process and its requirements. We understand that we cannot put a program to air that includes your unpublished results because you could lose publication in a peer-reviewed journal. We know what that means to you, so we won't do it. We often embargo stories and, if necessary, hold back on putting your story to air until after you have published. These are serious concerns to researchers and ones that most other programs are unaware of.

The Pitch

So you've decided that you want to take your story to the media and you've decided which media outlet you want to approach. For the sake of this paper, I will assume that you have decided to come to *Catalyst*. How do you approach us and what are some of the issues that you need to deal with as quickly as possible?

'How' is the easiest question to answer. Pick up the phone or send us an email. Our contact details are available on the internet as are the contact details for every journalist in every media across the country and around the world. All of us are continuously hungry for stories and always willing to listen to what is on offer.

That does not mean that we will accept every story that comes our way. On an average, about a third of the stories that come across my desk are brought to my attention by researchers approaching me on the phone or via email. Of those stories, perhaps one in ten will make it to air. But, if we don't know about your research, we can't make a story out of it! Do not be shy in approaching me or another journalist that you otherwise don't know. We are employed to listen to potential stories and will endeavour to get your story to air if we can.

It is important to contact a journalist well in advance of any fieldwork. This is particularly so for TV where we need time to organise film crews and a whole raft of other logistical concerns. I suggest a minimum of two months notice prior to the commencement of fieldwork but an optimum period would be six months or even a year. It is pointless contacting us a couple of weeks before fieldwork – we just cannot react that fast.

Preparation

We're going to take your time. Be prepared to give us three days in which you do nothing but television. That can be a really big hole in your precious field time and you need to be prepared for it. You will need to consider things like organising students to check traps, or volunteers to take care of logistics that you would normally deal with yourself.

I must confess that, when I first started working in television, I couldn't believe that it took three days to film an eight-minute television story. To the uninitiated this seems like an incredible waste. However, having been through six years of making science stories for television, I can't imagine a more economic way of operating. It might appear to be clumsy or time-wasting but that's the way we have to operate and that's what we will be asking of you if we come out to cover your story.

Be prepared to put yourself into our hands when it comes to film-making and story-telling. Quite often scientists do not understand why we need to film a particular scene four or five times (or even more!) but we have our reasons and need your cooperation. Be prepared to put up with our seemingly clumsy way of working.

We often work out of sequence which can be another aspect of TV production that often perplexes scientists. This can be due to simple considerations such as wanting to film particular scenes in the early morning and the evenings because the light is just right. There's nothing worse than trying to film when the sun has completely bleached everything out in the middle of the day.

We may not tell the story the way you might think we ought to. This is because the kinds of stories we tell need to engage a wide and varied audience and we are trained

to do just that. One basic rule for story-telling is that a human story appeals to the broadest audience so we often will tell the story of your research through a broader story about who you are and what you've been doing. Many scientists are uncomfortable with this and shy away from what they perceive as self-promotion. However, if you want to get a story up in the media, be prepared to answer questions about who you are and the kinds of ordeals you have had to put up with in order to conduct your research.

Prepare a list of possible scenes, items and vistas that you can suggest to the journalist as aids in putting together the story. What will we be seeing while you conduct your research out in the field and what associated images can also be filmed when we are there? Is there a good local scenic lookout that helps to set the scene of the environment you are working in? Can you guarantee that we will capture at least one of the animals at the centre of your research and, once captured, will we be able to get a good look at it? What about aspects of camp life – is there something unusual or interesting about that worth filming? The more elements we know about ahead of time that can be included in a story, the better the chances that we will agree to come out and cover the story.

When suggesting stories to us that need to be filmed in remote locations, it is also useful to suggest any other science stories in the area. Filming in remote areas is very expensive but we can offset costs if we cover three or four stories in the same area. It helps us greatly if you can suggest what other stories there are within a radius of a few hundred kilometres of your site. And, because of the nature of our program, the subjects of other stories can be very broad. Perhaps there is a telescope or weather station nearby conducting some interesting research, or there may be field stations for universities, or various government departments of agriculture or the environment. Chances are that you will know more about who is in the area than we will. It doesn't matter if you don't know exactly what they are doing but, if you alert us to their presence, we can follow up and find out if there is a story there for us.

Is there any special equipment that we ought to take out? This can include camping equipment and water through to specialised filming equipment. If we do need to take camping equipment, where can we hire it from, or can you lend us some items? Can you supply food if we pay you in advance?

We are going to need at least one and preferably two four-wheel-drive vehicles unless the road to your campsite is tarred all the way. Can you suggest the nearest location we might be able to hire two such vehicles from? Keep in mind that several rental companies do not allow their four-wheel-drive vehicles to travel off roads. Is that going to be a problem in reaching your site?

Power is a top priority for us. Our cameras are powered by rechargeable batteries and we need a generator running six hours continuously every day to charge those batteries. Is your generator up to that kind of work, or do you have another power supply that we can use? Should we consider shipping in extra fuel for the generator?

Do you have UHF radios or any other communication devices? It is important that we try and maintain contact with the office and we will bring out radio and other communication devices if required.

Do you have emergency plans? What can go wrong and what are you going to do if it does go wrong? With Occupational Health and Safety reporting these days it is crucial that we know of potential dangers and established emergency plans. Some of our shoots have been cancelled because there were risks with no established plan of action in the event of an accident.

Timing

A useful suggestion is to try and time the arrival of the film crew for about two-thirds of the way through your fieldwork. By that time you will have set up your camp and equipment and you will be getting some useful data. You might have caught animals that can be held for a day or two so that we can film them. You may want to take a mini-DV camera with you and film events and creatures caught before the film crew arrives. This is a useful back up in case you do not catch anything while we are there, or if nothing happens.

Expect that we will be filming with you in the field for

about three consecutive days. Filming outside major cities is expensive for us, costing in the vicinity of \$5000 per day, so we have to cram as much into the shortest possible filming period.

The bottom line

Research in arid zones offers enormous potential to us in the media to create interesting and engaging stories for our viewers. Our ratings clearly show that our viewers are interested in the science being conducted in remote and beautiful locations. The sort of research conducted in these amazing places is exactly the sort of stories that we like to tell on our program.

Making television in arid zones does present significant challenges, most of which can be overcome with some preparation and planning. We've been to some very difficult-to-get-at places and produced some wonderful television there. It is difficult but it is also rewarding and we have the experience to do it well.

We don't know what stories are out there unless you come to us and tell us what you've got. So please, feel free to approach me or any other journalist and tell us what you're up to. Invite us to your campsite and, if we have half the chance, we will be there.

References

Willis P.M.A., 2003. Making the change – crossing over from research science to science reporting. *Australian Zoologist* 32(2): 329 – 332.

APPENDIX I



Cameraman, producer and soundman Richard Corfield at work in the Willandra World Heritage Area, western New South Wales. As budgets become ever-tighter, one way that economies are being achieved in television production is to multi-skill staff so that the work of four people (reporter, camera, sound and producer) is reduced to two people. This way of working is becoming increasingly popular for more remote location shoots such as the arid zone but it does require more time and production values are often compromised.

Photo: Paul Willis, Catalyst, ABC TV.



Palaeontologist Peter Murray from the Museum of Central Australia with reporter Paul Willis on location at Alcoota, northwest of Alice Springs, Northern Territory. The television production team may request the involvement of the reporter in some aspect of the fieldwork. In this case, Paul (a palaeontologist by training) has spent several days excavating the fossil bones in the centre of the picture. This kind of involvement added greatly to the final story that went to air.

Photo: Paul Willis, Catalyst, ABC TV.