



Q&A: Researcher-Reporter Relationships

APRIL 10, 2024

On April 10, Emmy-nominated freelance journalist [Melissa Chan](#) and media savvy SSN member Dr. [Jules Boykoff](#) joined us for a Q&A focused on researcher-reporter relationships. Here are some of their insights:

On how working together is not actually working together:

Melissa: "A lot of people, especially in academia, think that when they're talking to a journalist, they're working together. And you always have to be aware we're not actually working together. I'm interviewing you and I'm going to produce something that you might not like, you might disagree with, because I'm actually speaking to a whole bunch of other experts, some in your field with opposite opinions, right?"

So that's one thing to think about. Jules, I mean, you have no idea what the post-production process looks like. You don't know what the script is looking like. You may not end up liking what comes out, right? I realize it's a difficult thing to ask academics.

We're essentially saying, we're gonna talk to you, and you have no control over it. And that's a really scary thing. And you can say no, and you can ignore emails and never write back."

On being unhappy with a reporter's final piece:

Melissa: "There are many academics who are unhappy, I think unfairly. We are writing news articles that are 800 words to 1,200 words or even a news documentary of half an hour. It's not going to be the totality of your work—ten years of research and books and things like that. And I feel like some academics expect that and it's really unrealistic."

Jules: "But also, if you're a source for a story, do your homework. [Figure out who they are.] If you get the article later and you can see that they've used your ideas all over the place, but not once did they ever mention that maybe some of these ideas came from you—for me, that's a no-no. And I know this is going to sound a little vindictive, but I have a little list in my brain of folks that have done me wrong and have taken up a lot of my time all for nothing. And guess what? If they come back around, you know that I probably won't respond to them."

Melissa: "One bad journalist who does something and it is in poor taste, it just sullies somebody's entire idea of all media. And that's really upsetting."

On how to start creating relationships with journalists:

Jules: "Pitching pieces to [opinion editors] and being as succinct as possible, respectful of their time. And then once you've actually worked with an editor, there are a number of things that you can do. For starters, I always send thank you notes afterwards once the piece is published and express my thanks for them taking time to work with me."

And if it was a positive experience, I'll let them know. Once you've established a relationship with an editor though, then you're in great shape. You know you've got somebody that will take your pitches. For a long time I was writing pieces for The Guardian, for one particular editor. And then when he moved on to the New York Times, he asked me to write an essay for the New York Times, because we had a positive working relationship. So really cultivating positive relationships, never being fake, but always being appreciative when it's merited. I think that's really important."

On preparing for TV interviews:

Jules: "I always know what I'm going to say. It's almost embarrassing to say how much I prepare to get ready for an interview. I don't want to waste their time, nor do I really want to look like a fool. So I will know my main things that I want to say when I'm getting ready for that interview."

And sometimes, with the miracle of Zoom, what you can actually do is right next to your camera there on your computer, you can have a little sticky sheet that says, here are the three things that you want to state, these are the most important points. So, you know, if you're doing an interview with **Melissa** on DW, you might have a five minute hole to say everything you want to say.

Melissa: "I'm an on air journalist and I still prepare. You feel like an idiot but you prepare in front of the mirror. Sometimes if you need to, you record yourself. We all have iPhones now. We didn't, you know, 20 years ago. So we have the gift of the iPhone. You can be privately, sort of mortified over yourself, but practice. These weird ticks come out. People don't realize. And also time yourself, right?"

For those TV interviews, it's amazing how time is elastic when you're talking. And it takes training to get a good sense of what one minute is, what two minutes is, what five minutes is."

On the value of connecting expert sources to each other:

Melissa: “Sometimes I'll be speaking to academics in one field and academics and experts in another field that usually don't touch, but for this particular story they're touching.

Or maybe the two things they're working on are kind of starting to merge in weird and funny ways. And I actually try to connect experts with each other. It's like, oh, you should talk to so-and-so if you've never met. I'll make this introduction because I think I'd like to continue to be able to speak to these people and, and sort of build goodwill, right?

And also because I think it's really cool to connect people who should be connected because I'm really excited about what they're respectively doing.”

On the issue of pay:

Jules: “I don't know if I'm the norm, I kind of doubt it, but I don't write things for free.

And I'll explain why. Not because I'm desperate for the money or something like that. Although I certainly don't mind it. But, I really don't want to undercut working journalists and people that are freelancing and that, you know, rely on these kinds of things. Placing these pieces and these publications for their livelihood.

And obviously it's also respecting your time and your labor. So especially with big publications, there's no way that I would write something for free.”

On whether it's appropriate to advocate for policy changes during a conversation with a journalist:

Jules: “Most academics, the work that they do, they care very deeply about. We spend a lot of time doing all this groundwork. Putting it through the peer review process. You know, you stand by that work, you're proud of that work, you're doing it because you think it can matter. So I'm a big fan of trying to swerve the discussion in directions that you want.”

On whether to engage with or avoid media outlets that have different politics than you:

Jules: “It happens once in a while where I'll get something from a publication that I just don't really like, and I'll just ignore it. On the other hand, if you're talking about an outlet like National Fox News, this could be an

opportunity to push back against some of the narratives that Fox News viewers might be hearing. So I would not necessarily say a direct no on that. It depends, live interview versus taped. Because if they're taping it, then they can pluck out whatever they want and make you look like a buffoon. So if you can get on live, that's better."

On outreach once you publish an OpEd:

Jules: "If you're on social media, obviously you can share [your piece] to your own comfort level. I started a small email list and if I have a piece I'm especially proud of, I'll send it out to that email list that includes my colleagues in academia, but also journalists with whom I've worked. If someone's come to me for a quote before, I'll add them to my email list. It's really easy and I only send it out once in a while because I don't want to create a burden for people. But that's a way of letting them know about your work, obviously, but also kind of reminding them, oh yeah, that's the guy who I got a quote from a long time ago."

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