



Conversations with the Experts

Academic-Press Relations: Are They Worth The Trouble? By Maggie Jackson



Maggie Jackson

Bio: Maggie Jackson is the National Workplace Writer for *The Associated Press*. Her column, "On the Job," is published in newspapers around the globe, and she lectures widely on topics related to the workplace and work-life balance. A graduate of Yale University and the London School of Economics, she is currently working on a book on the changing nature of home life in 21st century America.

Editors Note: In this article, Jackson explores academic/press relationships using excerpts from her interviews with three well-known work-family researchers. The author concludes with suggestions to improve communications and get the work/life message out to readers.

An Article By Maggie Jackson

Kathleen Gerson's thinking about the press has evolved over the years. After a honeymoon period when the New York University sociology professor felt eager to talk to just about any journalist, she grew frustrated. But now, she's both well versed in the complexities of the academic-press relationship, and eager to be interviewed.

"I feel it's my moral responsibility to give the public as much accurate information as possible," Gerson said. "I try to be as accessible as possible at this point, and that's why."

Many academics want their hard-earned research to reach a wide audience, but perhaps none more so than work-life researchers, whose work is both groundbreaking and crucial to today's families. Yet the academic-press relationship isn't always easy and sometimes is fraught with misapprehension. I had some eye-opening chats on this matter recently with Gerson and two other researchers, Phyllis Moen of Cornell and Margaret Neal of Portland State University.

While most universities and colleges issue press releases about research, the interview is the more important stage for most academic-press contact. Getting together by phone or even e-mail isn't easy, especially after a reputation is made and press calls become a deluge. Moen, a professor of Sociology and Human Development, does the best she can with her limited time, but usually misses journalists' deadlines by the time she responds. Like most academics, she realizes that when one source doesn't call back, another must be found.

A far worse sticking point than scheduling is interview content. Academics fear what they see as a relentless drive for a sound bite. "I've had very frustrating experiences, mostly things taken out of context for the good old sound bite," relates Neal, who will begin teaching at Portland State University's School of Community Health in July. Moen agreed. "The people are frequently misquoted, data is presented wrong," said Moen, who also directs the Cornell Employment and Family Careers Institute. "That's sort of embarrassing for people who make their money by being careful and precise."

Yet Moen astutely observes that academics can't expect journalists to need or want to hear every detail of their research. "I can't be on NBC and talk about controlling for this and that," said Moen. From my experience as a journalist, I'd add that academics can better control the outcome of an interview by succinctly answering questions.

I'd venture to say that nobody - academic or press - likes to dig himself out of an informational snowstorm on short notice.

These pitfalls of the interview are what ultimately helped inspire Kathleen Gerson to become more, rather than less available to the press. "It's true that many academics are loathe to make themselves accessible to the media," said Gerson, whose latest book is *Children of the Gender Revolution: Growing Up in an Age of Work and Family Change*. "There's a certain skepticism about how their work will be presented. Will it be conveyed accurately and to the public in a wider way?" With this in mind, Gerson tries to keep getting the word out about her work.

Ultimately, academic-press relations boil down to a matter of translation, it seems to me. Academics want to relate the complexities and nuances of their research to a public who may not or cannot always fully understand them. The press is firmly in the middle. If the press cannot carve out that balance between depth and clarity, then the process of communication breaks down. After all, the American public is not going to read most academic journals and scour university bookshelves looking for solutions to their everyday problems. Like all of us, they're just trying to survive. In the long run, better relations with benefit not only academics and the media, but Americans' daily lives.

Other tips on bettering academic-media relations:

- If it's important to you to get a copy of the article in which you were quoted, tell this to the journalist. Journalists usually don't have secretaries, and it's tremendously hard for them to provide this service. But if they know that a copy will help you get your next grant, that shows them that it's more than curiosity or vanity that inspired you to ask.
- Ask your university press office to set up a workshop with the local press so both sides can meet, make contacts and air some of these frustrations. Ask the office to send out more press releases if they're not already doing as many as you'd like. That way, journalists at least will have the ABCs of your new study before them when they call.
- Make time for journalists. Work-life is a relatively new beat at many publications and reporters usually are trying their best to learn. By helping educate them - even on topics that seem simple to you - you're helping your field.

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