

Media Do's and Don'ts (ALA)

Rule 1:

Don't be afraid to ask your own questions. Who is your questioner? What's the name and type of publication or station? Find out the reporter's topic, angle, and deadline. If you do not feel qualified to address the issue or if you are uncomfortable with the angle, say so. Suggest other angles or sources of information.

Rule 2:

Be prepared to answer the standard who, what, when, where, why, and how questions. Have supporting facts and examples available, or know where you can get them. But don't give them all at once!

Rule 3:

Be positive, honest, and straightforward. Offer facts, not conjecture, and be sure to get your positive statement up front. Tell the truth, be clear about whom you are speaking for, whether it is yourself, your library, or library association. If you don't know an answer, tell your interviewer that you will get back to him or direct him to the appropriate person. Never assume that anything you say is "off the record." It can and probably will be used. And never say, "No comment." If you are asked for information you can't release, tell the reporter that you can't release the information and explain why.

Rule 4:

Pause before you answer a question. Listen -- really listen -- to the questioner. Suspend all judgment of the individual and identify the issue. Take a moment to think about what you want to say and the best way to say it. Try to empathize with the questioner. What is he or she really asking and why? By actively listening, you're showing you've given the question serious consideration. If a question has an obvious bias, try to use positive language. For example: "You evidently have strong feelings about this" or "I respect your views, but let me give you another perspective."

Rule 5:

When necessary, reframe the question. A reporter asks, "Why does your library encourage kids to look at pornography by letting them use the Internet?" Don't respond negatively. Strip away loaded words by saying, "Let me be sure I understand the question: It's about how children are using the Internet in our library."

Rule 6:

Beware of manipulation. Some reporters may ask leading questions. They often start with "Would you say" and then state an idea that you're to agree or disagree with. Don't be pressured into a quick response. Remember Rule 2: Pause and think first. Then, make your own statement. If you don't know an answer or need more time, tell the reporter you will get back to him or her.

Rule 7:

Never repeat a negative. Frame your answer in positive terms. Question: "Why do librarians encourage children to look at smut by letting them use the Internet?" Wrong answer: "Librarians don't encourage children to look at smut." Right answer: "Librarians care deeply about children. Our role is to guide and assist them in selecting the best materials for their needs, whether it's a good book or a good Web site. We are expert Internet navigators, and we are willing and eager to help parents teach their children to use the Internet appropriately to locate quality sites."

Rule 8:

Don't give one-word answers. Use every opportunity to make your point and reinforce your message. Question: Isn't it true that librarians spend money on Internet access that could be better spent on books? Wrong answer: "No." Right answer: "We believe people need information in all forms. Internet access is one more valuable learning tool, and it can sometimes provide information in a way that a single collection of books in any one library cannot."

Rule 9:

Talk in soundbites. These brief, "quotable" statements should contain an emotional response or a declaration that puts an issue into perspective. Ideally it should create a "word picture" that will make a lasting impression. Here are some examples for questions about children and online pornography:

- "The best way to ensure your child's safety online is to be there."
- "You would not expect your child to learn to ride a bike without your help."
- "Putting blinders on children is not the answer."
- "Having the government or libraries censor is not the answer. Rather, all of us must teach children the same kind of safety measures for the Internet that we do for the mall."

Rule 10:

Remember to "bridge," "flag," and "hook." These three techniques will help you take control in a variety of interview situations.

"Bridging" allows you to take a question and create an opportunity to make the point you want to make. Here are two ways to bridge:

A reporter asks you a great, positive question, perhaps one of the three questions you would most like to answer. "Isn't it true that libraries are one of the few places that teach parents and children to use the Internet?"

First answer the question. Then, before the reporter asks the next question, state another one you would like to answer. "While we're talking about the role of librarians in teaching our users about the Internet, let me share with you a question I'm often asked: 'With the vast amount of information available on the Internet, how can parents possibly know exactly what is appropriate and reliable for their child?'"

"Let me answer by saying that no one parent or librarian can possibly know that. The Internet is too vast. That is why our library has developed a special children's home page to help them find appropriate websites they'll enjoy."

Another way to use a bridge is when you are asked a question you don't want to answer: "Isn't it true that part of the problem is that librarians are unwilling to filter the Internet?" The negative question deserves a short answer, followed by a new question and longer answer. "It is true that filters are a faulty technology in a library situation. The more important question is: What are we librarians doing to help parents and their children use the Internet effectively and safely? Let me answer that."

"Flagging" is a technique you can use to focus your listener's attention by putting a "flag" on the statement. This is particularly helpful with reporters who don't seem to be getting your point or in lengthy interviews where your message might get lost. For example: "The most important point I have to make is..." or "Here are three things you need to know...."

"Hooking" is a verbal technique that lets you trap the questioner into hearing your three important points. Example: "Margo, there are really three ways to answer your question. The first is...."

Rule 11:

Be repetitive and plagiarize when necessary. Research shows that people need to hear something seven times in order to remember it. Seven may seem like a high number, but even reporters need to hear things more than once. Repeat as much as you can, work your message into your answers, and remember that neither your message nor your answer needs to be original. What you need is to be clear, concise, and likable. Use ALA's media materials, and adapt them for your own needs.

Rule 12:

Anticipate and practice. You can anticipate most hard questions and learn to answer them by practicing. Answer the worst questions you can imagine. Role play with colleagues or, even better, non-library friends. The worst trap you can fall into is using library jargon with laypeople!