

Talking to the press

The following is a transcript of a talk Rosie Waterhouse of the Independent gave at this year's AGM.

When Alison Macfarlane asked me to give this talk today I agreed, only on the understanding that at least some of you start buying *The Independent* (we really do need more readers). *The Guardian* doesn't have Melanie Phillips writing on statistics any more so you've no excuse!

I am here today mainly to give you some ideas on how Radical Statistics can get its message across to the serious press and explain what journalists need when you want to bring issues to the public's attention. My brief is to remind you that the role of journalists is an important one in disseminating and interpreting statistics and stimulating debate.

For example, last December *The Financial Times* ran a brilliant story about a leaked memo from Conservative Central Office to Tory MPs talking about strategy for the next election. It was written by John Maples, deputy chairman of the Tory Party, and it called for MPs to identify 'killer facts.' These were facts and figures which ministers could use to present a positive picture of the Government's record on things like the economy: lower unemployment, more jobs, more exports, low inflation etc. On education they could trumpet league tables as improving standards. On health, it said the best strategy would be to say nothing at all.

This was a great story from a journalist's point of view. All journalists love leaked documents. We are always waiting for the anonymous brown envelope to arrive with the scoop of the century. My favourite definition of a good story is something that someone doesn't want you to know. So if any of you come by any leaked documents please send them to me. No names necessary.

The 'killer facts' story was also an important one from a public interest point of view because it showed the public just how cynically some politicians are prepared to manipulate statistics to help their cause. Most other serious newspapers followed up the story and Labour politicians have been quoting it ever since.

I'll tell you a bit about how newspapers work; how journalists get stories and try to persuade news editors to put them in the paper; and how you can better get your message across. You will

be competing with major national and international events and remember, even journalists on the same paper are essentially competing with each other to get their story into the paper.

There are several sources for stories coming into a newspaper office: post (brown envelopes welcome), the telephone (calling at 6 o'clock is too late to get a story in the paper unless it's earth-shattering); personal contacts, meetings, sometimes over a drink or lunch. I personally prefer information in writing, preferably a few days in advance if it's about a forthcoming event or paper or report.

Another good source of stories for journalists is conferences. Today would have been a good start to raise Radical Statistics' profile. I don't know what arrangements you made, if any, for inviting the media or sending them your agenda. But the subjects you are talking about should be of interest to many serious journalists. If you had outlines, or better still, the full text, of speeches in advance you could send them to the press. Saturday is not the best day to hold a conference if you want media coverage because getting stories into Sunday newspapers is a very unpredictable business. I know because I've worked for them. It is possible the Sunday papers would be interested but most reporters would be unwilling to spend all day at a conference - apart from the big party conferences and those of the teaching professions and trade unions perhaps. That's why you would stand a better chance of getting coverage if, several days, even weeks, before, you send in your agenda, perhaps summaries, preferably copies of speeches and include contact telephone numbers. You should enclose a press release highlighting the main stories of the day and embargo the information. In your case, if the conference started at 10am on Saturday, that would be the embargo time.

Sunday is a good day for holding events or putting out press releases or reports timed for Monday's papers. Daily newspapers usually have lots of space on a Monday and reporters working on Sunday are often desperate for stories.

The *British Medical Journal* and the *Lancet* are good examples of how to get essentially academic and sometimes complicated papers into the press. Although the journals are weekly and Radical Statistics newsletter is quarterly, I think you could pick up some very useful tips from their methods.

The journals both have editorials which are accessible to the lay reader and are usually interesting and occasionally deliberately controversial to catch a journalist's eye. A separate press release highlighting the most interesting and important papers points journalists to several potential stories. If you do this on a regular basis, with embargoed reports and newsletters, you stand a good chance of journalists writing the story as most of us are afraid of missing a story which is later used in a rival paper.

Who to contact in the media is quite a tricky question for you because you are different groups dealing with different subjects like health and housing and education. You could compile a list of the names of specialists on each newspaper or just address any information to the health correspondent, education correspondent or whoever. It is often worth sending a copy to the news editor as well. It would also be useful to send material to the Press Association whose wires are picked up by the national and regional newspapers and broadcasters. The specialist journals interested in subjects like health and education should also be on your list.

You could begin with a media launch of Radical Statistics. Put together a press pack detailing who you are and what you do and contacts for journalists to telephone. The launch could be pegged to the publication of one of your newsletters, or a special study or piece of research. Again produce a press release highlighting the strongest line in the report or newsletter, and if the details are complex, explain them in plain English. For example, if your research shows the Government has misrepresented figures, say so and explain what the figures really mean.

A good example of a statistics story that worked really well is the recent work that Alison Macfarlane did which showed how health ministers misrepresented statistics to claim the NHS reforms were a success. She showed that statements like "more patients treated than ever before" and "more money spent than ever before" and "more people satisfied with the NHS than ever before" were, at best, misleading. The *Independent* printed extracts of the analysis in a story of about 800 words which, for a daily newspaper, is a big spread.

After we ran Alison's story as part of a series about official statistics, we invited people to write in with other examples of uses and abuses of statistics. We had one of the biggest post-

bags ever, which shows that there is a great deal of interest in issues like the integrity of official statistics.

You won't be able to interest every newspaper in what you have to say all of the time. You will be competing with stories of national and international importance. But statistics can be a good story, especially when you catch out politicians who misuse them. To interest journalists you must have new information which is important, shocking or surprising or of strong public interest. But with some thought and planning and organisation, you should be able to sell such stories to the serious press.