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Reporters working on stories often approach academics. That can be flattering, but quite a few professors get into scrapes because they either don't know or ignore media rules of engagement. We've just passed the 10-year anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In the midst of our reflections, internalized grief, and public memorializing, it would be wise to remember that Ward Churchill, a former University of Colorado professor, lost his job after his intemperate remarks over 9/11 made him an object of negative attention. Under the glare of media scrutiny, Churchill was eventually dismissed for research misconduct. One may think whatever one wishes about the content of Churchill's 9/11 remarks or his right to utter them, but however one parses it, what got Churchill into trouble was making his thoughts public. Uttered in private, he would have been, at worst, a boorish lout. Once he placed himself under the microscope, other flaws emerged.

Most academics (mercifully) don't get called upon to comment on things as weighty as 9/11, but many are solicited for comments on newsworthy events. If you teach at a smaller college outside of a major city, the likelihood of being consulted by local media actually *increases*; smaller media outlets generally rely upon informants close at hand. Count on the fact that your chance of being contacted increases if your teaching or research has anything to do a ballyhooed past event with an approaching anniversary ending in five or zero. It need not even be an obvious link; when big anniversaries of notable rock concerts draw near I get calls because I've taught courses on social movements and on music. Forget about the fact that I've written mostly about *folk* and *Celtic* music!

I've been on both sides of the reporters' pad, as I also engage in some part-time and freelance journalism. Believe me when I tell you that academics and journalists reside in different universes — not necessarily antithetical ones, but certainly worlds with differing underlying assumptions. Here are a few things to keep in mind if you are asked to make public comment.

1. If you say it, you can't take it back. There really is generally no such thing as "off the record." Many people believe that a verbal request not to publish a statement protects them, but if you make a public utterance -- and you are "public" the moment you agree to speak with a reporter -- you need to be very circumspect. If you utter something you wish you hadn't, a reporter is usually within his or her legal rights to use your remark and your only recourse is to *ask* that it not be used. How confident are you in making such a request of a stranger whose very job it is to manufacture a good story hook? Be wary of the sort of subtle wisecracks and glib remarks you might make in class to get a cheap laugh or spark a debate. Remember also that any comments you make *will* appear out of context. That's because...

2. Scholars seek nuance; reporters have word limits. You may talk to a reporter for a half hour or more, but you're going to be a two-line quote (at best) when the story is published or aired. I actually think academics could learn an awful lot about brevity and engaging writing from journalists, but the latter do trade in annoying "sound bites" that dumb down subjects. Don't be surprised when the least weighty thing you said is deemed the most quotable. You really have two choices; you can be righteously outraged by this practice, or you can pause before you speak and construct the kind of sound bite you can live with.

3. Print and radio are different from conversation. Public commentary should be as specific as the wording in your research. Beware of irony! What sounds witty as it comes out of your mouth may look smug on the printed page. In like fashion, a jibe or jest that makes a radio interviewer smile in the studio will not register on the airwaves and may sound arrogant. Keep in mind that you are being called upon to explain things to folks who have only partial (if any) understanding of them. Seek to be as clear as you possibly can be.

4. Don't be afraid to decline comment. As a historian I'm occasionally asked to predict how some issue or other will trend. Much of my published work, for instance, is in the field of *19th-century* labor history. I emphasize the time period because around Labor Day I get calls asking me to comment on the future of labor unions. I decline most of them because I work with the *past*, not the future. My predictions might have more depth than those of the casual observer, but there's no reason to think my crystal ball is any more accurate, and I'm skeptical that there's a direct link between my 19th-century research and contemporary sociology. I'm happy to speak to the history of Labor Day, but I leave prognostication to others.

My advice is to follow suit. Tell reporters you simply can't comment on things that take you too far from your expertise and comfort range. An ancillary is to take your mother's advice: "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything." Be very, very careful if asked to make a comment on any living person, especially if they are connected with your university or the town in which you live.

5. Reporters are not your friends. Most aren't your enemies either; they're more akin to the electrician you hire in that they are doing a job, which they'd like to do well and fast. Be respectful of their time and try to help them do it efficiently; save the longwinded parry and banter for your colleagues. An interview is not the same as a lecture or a conversation. If you take ten minutes to answer one question, the reporter will either find your answer unusable, or slice it into small morsels you're likely to find distasteful. Reporters approaching an "expert" certainly want something more substantive than could be gleaned from *Wikipedia*, but they don't want your dissertation either. Frankly, a good reason to be succinct is that the longer you talk the more likely you are to utter one of those sound bites you'd rather not have repeated.

6. Your audience is the public. Almost all of us rely (to varying degrees) upon public funding, grants, and the community in which we work. Some may disagree, but I think it's useful for academics to venture out of the ivory tower and speak to non-academics in ordinary language. Those who can't do this are, in my view, merely bad communicators, not deep thinkers. It is unrealistic to expect that non-experts can understand *all* that you do, but it is condescending to think they can't understand *any* of it. I certainly agree that many things are hard to distill, but I marvel when an NPR reporter interviews a scientist who can really explain quarks, or a mathematician who tells me why the Fibonacci Sequence is something I should care about. You can be smart without being pedantic. Make lay terms your default position. If, for any reason, you can't or don't wish to explain yourself in plain speech, by all means be one of those who declines comment.

7. Remember that you represent your university. College news offices love to see professors' names in the media — most of the time. Sometimes, though, they have to repudiate what professors say. This is especially the case with controversial topics, such as those uttered by Ward Churchill. Make sure that you separate personal views from university policy. You do *not* want to have the news office release a statement whose gist is "Professor X does not speak for the college in this matter." That's a big oh-no moment!

Take a hypothetical situation. What would you say if a reporter asked you to comment on a reported, but unsubstantiated racial incident on campus? Student reaction will be strong and emotional, but your comments need to be more measured. You should not, as some students will do, denounce the administration and accuse it of coddling racism, even if the alleged incident in question infuriated you. You certainly can say that *you* deplore such incidents and that both you and the university are committed to making the campus a welcoming place for all. But if investigation is ongoing and you have no idea of how the provost is handling the situation, do not presume to speak for that office, or assume that students are correct in asserting that nothing is being done. Alas! I've been around long enough to know that some of the events that send a campus into a tizzy turn out to be false. It would be impolitic to mention colleges by name, but let's just say that Google searches will turn up stories of campus sexual assaults, police brutality, racial graffiti, and other such like that were less than originally met the eye. I'm not suggesting that you must make yourself into a PR shill for your institution, but you certainly don't want to damage it, and you really don't want to be on the administrative carpet without moral or intellectual cause.

8. Beware of ideologically charged situations. This is a tough one. As we all know, there is a "shock jock" media subculture (left and right) that thrives on exploiting controversies (or creating them out of thin air). My biggest advice is to go nowhere near such individuals, but that's not always your call. I taught a course a few years ago on the 1960s that *sounded* controversial (though it was actually a course on American culture). My university took the view that as a public institution we couldn't ignore withering criticism from a virulent shock jock and — against my counsel — I found myself a guest on his show. Here are some special things to keep in mind should this ever happen to you:

(a) *Be pleasant.* That's not as hard as it sounds and it's very effective. You got the invite because you're assumed to be an adversary. But what if you simply don't play? What if you're respectful, thoughtful, and upbeat? What if you behaved as if you were a guest in someone's home? The very first question I was asked was whether I passed out marijuana before each class. I laughed at the attempted joke and replied, "Well, I doubt stoned students would do very well in this course. They have to read 150 pages a week, complete five papers, attend a conference, and be present at several out-of-school events." Bullet dodged.

(b) *Do not take bait; be calm.* The opening question is the shtick of such shows and it helps to recognize that. Shock jocks are entertainers, not reporters. What they do is continually throw out vaguely insulting questions in hope of getting a rise out of you. They *want* you to wax indignant, shout, be outraged, and maybe even stomp out. Do *not* for a moment think you are clever enough to beat them at their own game; they know the entertainment field just as surely as you know your research specialty. Your goal is to stay cool long enough to be considered a "dull" guest.

(c) *Respond to perception with facts and/or deflections.* I'll say it again; don't debate. This isn't an academic conference; in fact, much of the time shock jocks do little or no actual background work. My host had never seen my syllabus, had never logged on to the Website, or read the university catalogue. I responded to one allegation by calmly saying, "If what you described was true, I'd be the first to join you in being outraged. But let me tell what students are *actually* reading in this course." I also gave an email address and offered to send my syllabus to anyone who wanted it. When asked why we should tolerate certain behaviors the interviewer presumed I was promoting, I replied simply, "Oh, I agree that there is lots of room to be critical of such things. Let me give you an example of what we discuss that touches on precisely the issue that you raised." An inevitable question is why students should study x instead of y. It helps to know your institution. That one was easy; I advised that we have many courses on Y; in fact, we have an entire major!

(d) *Stay collected and gracious. Let the host make errors.* Even if you have to bite your tongue, stay positive. I thanked my host for the opportunity of setting the record straight and his audience for listening. That wasn't disingenuous; I actually enjoyed the interview and found it challenging. The cool thing is that I got quite a few emails—mostly from listeners apologizing for the host's behavior. I answered every one of them with the respect they had shown me and it didn't hurt a bit! Did I win any converts? Doubtful, but I wasn't seeking any.

And that, in a nutshell, is the moral. When addressing the public, be a thoughtful information giver, not a polemicist or a self-promoter.

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