

Guidelines for Interviews With the Media



U.S. Nuclear
Regulatory Commission

Guidelines for interviews with the media

The NRC has long been open in its activities and forthcoming with the public and the media. But today—in a world of terrorism concerns, energy debates and environmental activism—the NRC’s ability to accurately and promptly respond to the media is more important than ever.

Because the NRC’s Office of Public Affairs (OPA) is the primary liaison between the media and the agency most, though not all, media inquiries come through this office. If OPA needs a technical expert or program official to provide information, you may be called on to help out. If you have concerns or do not want to participate, tell the public affairs officer immediately. If you are willing to share your expertise with the media, there are some simple things you should know and a few things you should avoid.

Preparing for a telephone interview



The public affairs officer can give you a general idea of what questions may be asked. Take a few minutes to gather relevant materials, including the correct title or NUREG number for publications that you might reference, and to jot down any reminders about messages or major points you want to convey during the interview.

Establishing ground rules

The public affairs officer may have already established ground rules but it’s good to clarify the rules before the interview starts. For example: Will you be quoted by name or only be providing background information? Will you be taped?

Tips for a successful interview

- Listen carefully to the questions so you’re answering what’s been asked. If you don’t understand the question, get clarification. Don’t guess at the meaning and confuse the reporter with an off-the-mark response.
- Make sure you respond truthfully and completely to questions and don’t withhold important information simply because the reporter didn’t know what to ask. It’s not in the agency’s best interest for a news story to be incomplete or inaccurate.
- Keep your answers concise. If your answer is extremely complex, break it into understandable parts. Periodically ask the reporter if anything is unclear or needs further clarification.
- Avoid too much technical jargon, which is confusing and can create an impression that the NRC is being evasive. If you use jargon, define it or explain what you mean. “In a PWR, a pressurized water reactor, it’s important to understand that . . .” Keep your answer on track and avoid rambling and too much detail or personal asides that are unnecessary or inappropriate.
- Provide accurate information. Don’t guess! If you don’t know the specifics, it’s ok to say so and arrange to get back to them with the answer or to get someone else to respond.
- Stick to your area of expertise. If a question goes beyond what you’re familiar with or comfortable discussing, refer the reporter back to OPA staff, who will arrange for someone else to address the question.
- Try to put factual information into perspective or provide analogies or examples. When discussing a release of radioactivity, for example, you might explain that the amount of radiation released is “X” percent of the amount allowed by Federal regulations. Without the explanation, the numerical quantity might alarm people.



What not to do during an interview

- Don’t go off the record. Everything you say to a reporter is fair game. If you’re tempted to say something off the record, it’s probably not information that should be revealed.
- Don’t venture opinions on policy or political matters or provide information on pre-decisional Commission matters, and don’t speculate on future agency actions or answer hypothetical “what-if” questions. For the latter, provide information about preventive actions the NRC may have taken or relevant research studies, but answering hypothetical questions can lead to sensational headlines.
- Don’t let yourself be badgered into talking about subjects you’re uncomfortable with. Be polite but firm and refer the reporter back to OPA.
- Don’t get angry—you may say something you’ll regret, which will reflect poorly on the agency as a whole. Reporters are primarily looking for information, not trying to make the agency look bad. Sometimes, though, a reporter may be unusually aggressive or rude. It’s important that you stay calm and, if necessary, politely end the interview.
- Never say “no comment.” Instead, explain why you can’t answer a question or give information you can provide: “I’m sorry, but that information is confidential. What I can say is . . .”



After an interview

Check back with the public affairs officer (if he or she was not present during the interview) and briefly report on what was said, and any concerns you have or issues that were raised. While the details are still fresh, you may want to tell the public affairs officer how you felt about the interview and ways to improve interviews in the future.

What about broadcast interviews?

The vast majority of media interviews at the NRC are not on camera. On-camera interviews have different requirements, which the public affairs officer will help you understand. For example, you need to look at the person posing the question and not at the camera, and you need to communicate in short “sound bites” of 15 to 30 seconds. The public affairs officer can also advise you about your appearance (for example, not wearing plaids or prints or white shirts for the interview).

What to do if the media contacts you directly

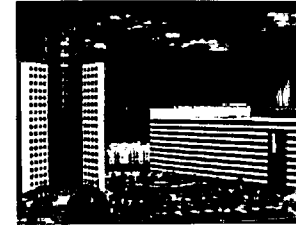
Most media inquiries go through OPA, but sometimes reporters will contact you directly. In that case, you are encouraged to contact OPA. That way, the public affairs officers are in the loop and can better prepare you for an interview. The public affairs officer may know the reporter and what he or she usually covers or may know why a certain issue has arisen at that particular time. OPA may also determine that someone else with a different technical background or at a different level in the organization would be more appropriate for the interview.

It's important to act quickly on any media request to meet the reporter's deadline. If you don't promptly agree to the interview or refer them to OPA, the story may run without NRC's viewpoint—a missed opportunity to keep the public informed.

If you choose to answer the reporter's questions without first contacting OPA, keep in mind the tips outlined earlier. Be sure to establish ground rules and avoid stepping outside your area of expertise. After the interview, let OPA know what took place and the name and number of the reporter—often an e-mail suffices.

What to do about after-hours media requests

There is a public affairs officer on call at all times. The Headquarters Operations Center will have the name and phone number of the on-call public affairs official and will help you reach the official.



How to improve your interview skills



The NRC offers several relevant training courses, including media training and risk communication. Check the Intranet for more information at:

www.internal.nrc.gov/training.html.

Remember that every interaction with a reporter provides the agency with an opportunity to influence a news story and get our message out to the public.