

A top-down view of a desk with a laptop, camera, and office supplies. The laptop is silver and open, showing the keyboard. A black camera lens is on the left. A black camera body with a lens is on the right. A pair of glasses is in the center. A roll of yellow tape is at the bottom. Three paper clips are scattered around. The background is dark.

Church World Service

PRESS ENGAGEMENT HANDBOOK

Church World Service works on a number of issues that often intersect with the news headlines of the day. Whether it's refugee resettlement, people seeking asylum, the impacts of climate change or something else, there is often a place for our voice in the public conversation. As a result, you may have an opportunity to respond to press inquiries about ongoing and breaking news. This media engagement guide is designed to provide you with tips and tools to amplify your and CWS's voice when working with members of the press. We hope that this guide will also help you feel more confident when speaking about important issues in general.

Because we are a 501(c)(3) organization, CWS employees cannot be seen to endorse a political party or candidate, regardless of whether we are in an election cycle.

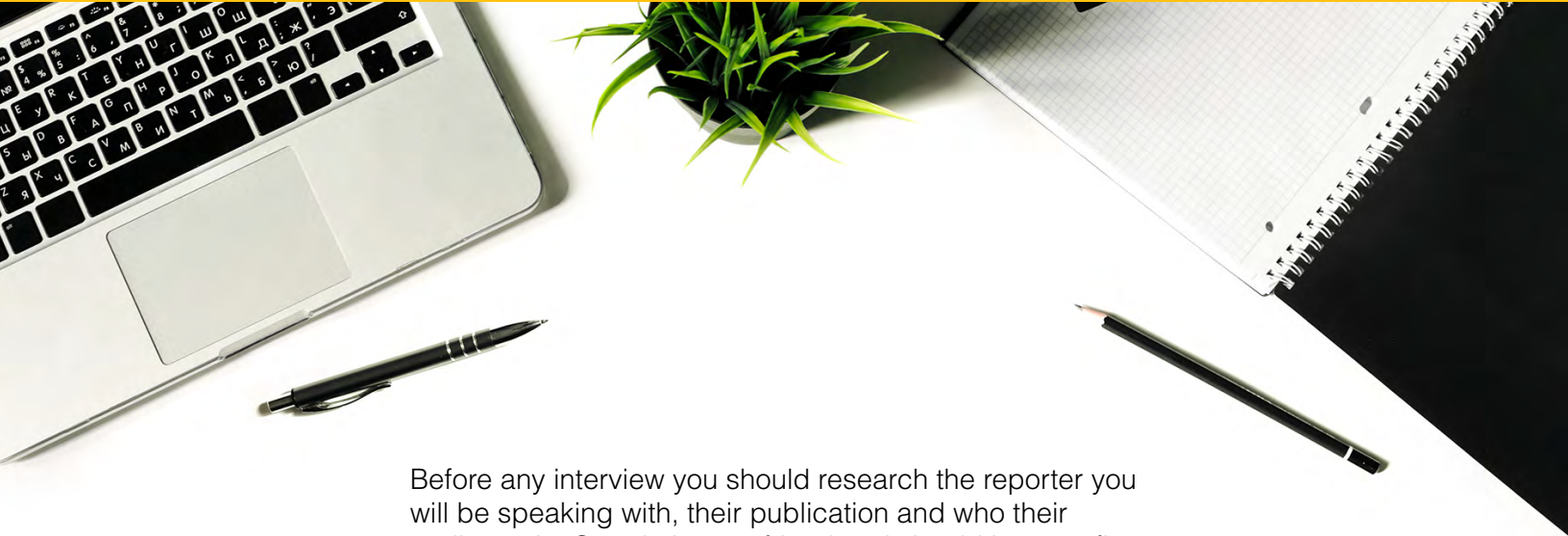
CWS employees cannot be seen to endorse a political party or candidate. However, it is still possible to speak to members of the press without explicitly endorsing someone who is running for office. You can still applaud or criticize the policies of officials. We only ask that during an election cycle you check in with us to see whether or not your proposed talking points are within acceptable parameters.

Our main tactic is sharing facts and stories. We can share both when responding to the press without being at risk of endangering our 501(c)(3) status. We can do so because objectively sharing information, without framing it to endorse a candidate, is for the public good.

In this guide, you will find tips to doing a successful media interview and tools to get out of situations with members of the press that you might find problematic.

As always, if you have concerns about an interview, questions as to whether it's a good idea to speak with a member of the press, or want more training on speaking about our issues with members of the public, we encourage you to speak to members of the CWS Communications Team. You may contact us at media@CWSGlobal.org.

BEFORE YOUR INTERVIEW



Before any interview you should research the reporter you will be speaking with, their publication and who their audience is. Google is your friend and should be your first step in figuring out where the reporter is coming from. Look first at the publication the reporter is working for to see if they have a particular slant to their articles, then look at the most recent articles written by the reporter. You may be surprised to find out that, especially on the local and state level, the reporter may have never written about our issues. This means you have a great opportunity to shape their coverage.

When confirming the interview, you should feel free to ask what specifically the reporter wants to discuss and what the article will be about. These follow up questions not only let you know what materials you should study before the interview, but it will help put you at ease about where the reporter is coming from.

Remember, you are speaking to the reporter, yes, but you're also speaking to the people who read/listen/watch the reporter's content. We often think, "I really wish the public would understand this about our issue." Well, this is your opportunity to speak to them. Think about that, it will help you frame what you want to say.

Before the interview, come up with three key talking points that you can include in any answer you give. Think of this collection of points as your North Star, and you should return to these when you can. This may feel repetitive, so feel free to mix up the language. But keep in mind that being repetitive isn't a bad thing; it shows that you're focused and pragmatic.

DURING THE INTERVIEW

MESSAGING

The context of the interview may be different, but as CWS employees our key talking points remain the same. During election cycles we would all like to weigh in on which candidate's policies will better serve our work, but our hands are tied when we're speaking as a CWS employee. This means we must save our personal opinions and lean on facts and stories.

Always focus on the facts of our issues and how they've been impacted by national or international leaders or policies. Then frame your answers around how the work of CWS improves people's lives in the context of these issues.

We encourage you to share stories so that the reporter hears about what they can't find online. Tell them stories of the refugees you work with, lives impacted by racial injustice, communities affected by natural disasters, or how your work has affected positive change in the world. The CWS Communications team can advise on how to frame your work in a particular media landscape, but as always, you should focus on the challenges you face within a matrix of the good your work has done. Of special note, we should not lean into the suffering that our communities face, but rather simply share stories as to how our work saves or improves lives.

SUCCESSFUL INTERVIEWS

Messaging is always the most important aspect of having a successful interview; if you clearly communicate your talking points, then you already should consider the conversation a win. However, to better communicate those key messages, you should keep a few things in mind.

When we get a chance to talk to someone in the press, we will often try to pass along everything we think the public should know. Sometimes doing that waters down the points that could have an impact on the article or segment the journalist is creating. You may be speaking to a reporter who has never covered this topic before, so be detailed, stay on topic, remember your key messages and go slow. You should feel free to speak beyond the narrow aspects of the reporter's questions and take advantage of open-ended questions, but don't unload all of your expertise at once. Sometimes a successful interview can be about establishing a relationship with the reporter, not just getting quoted or informing one article. If you create more work for them, they might go to someone else in the future.

Often flubs and errors in an interview happen when you feel like you have to fill silence by talking more. Reporters always use this technique because they know sometimes the juicier bit of information comes after you answer the direct question. It's ok to let the silence set in. If that's uncomfortable, you can ask, "Does that answer your question?" That way the ball is back in the reporter's court and you won't go off topic.

Being interviewed can be nerve-wracking, which means you start speaking faster to get through the process. Take a breath and focus on making sure the words are heard. It will seem to you like you're speaking at a snail's pace, but to the reporter it will show your confidence and allow them to take notes to mark your key points.





HOW TO BE QUOTABLE

It's common that after a full conversation with a reporter, you'll only see one line in their article about it. That can be frustrating if you spend 30 minutes or more speaking with them.

It's not because you don't know what you're talking about; it's because either the reporter doesn't know how to fit what you had to say into their article or because you were speaking to them as a fellow expert.

The best way to change that is to take your key talking points and figure out how to say them in a relatable way that has passion and strong language behind it. A reporter typically wants to do an interview for several reasons: they don't understand the issue, or they want specific information about the issue (data, contributions to the community, etc) or a compelling story to make the issue relatable. **If you want to be quoted in the article, then you should make your remarks passionate and personal.**

Don't be afraid to speak from the heart and show emotion. The reporter will not be writing an academic paper, so being passive will not work in your favor.

Try finding compelling data and statistics that underline your point and make it relatable both to the reporter and their readers. For example, we know that in 2015 refugees paid over \$21 billion in taxes, but does the reporter? We encourage you to find examples specific to your community that may open the eyes of the public. That being said, data and hard facts are great, and they will greatly increase your chance of getting quoted in an article, but NEVER use a stat unless you are one hundred percent sure it is accurate.

If you are wrong with one of your stats, it could undermine your argument and your credibility with the reporter and with the public. If the reporter asks a question about a specific figure and you don't know the answer at the moment, it is entirely reasonable to say, "I'd be happy to get back to you with that specific data after we're done chatting." Reporters don't expect you to have every fact memorized; they know you're the expert but don't expect you to be a robot.

We also recommend offering anecdotal examples that could pique the reporter's interest. You likely have many stories at your disposal of those directly impacted by your work. Tell their story, show how what you do has a real world impact. Don't underestimate how much the stories you know can sway public sentiment, they may seem banal, given your long work in this field, but for the layperson, they could be life-changing.

If the reporter asks a question that is off base or isn't really related to the issue at hand, let your response steer the conversation back to which of your core messages is the closest.

NEVER cite a statistic unless you are 100% sure it is accurate. Never estimate, and never ballpark it. It can undermine your argument and your credibility with the reporter and public.

BATTLING BAD QUESTIONS

Just as we are proponents of our work, there are opponents who try to create an alternative narrative arguing against what we do. The best way to respond to questions that use the framing of our opponents is to pivot back to your key messages. You do this by what we call “Bridging Techniques.”

Bridging helps you avoid answering combative questions without being argumentative. The reporter may not be an expert on our issues, but that doesn't mean they'll take kindly to being told they don't know what they're talking about. Think of bridging as a polite rebuff or a savvy way of turning the conversation away from trouble areas. Here are few examples of how to respond to a poor question and get back to your messaging:

- “That's a great perspective, it makes me think about...”
- “Let me put that in perspective.”
- “It's important to remember that...”
- “Interestingly enough, it's actually more often the case that...”
- “I'm afraid I can't speak to that specifically, but what I can say is...”

Using these types of phrases lets both the reporter and audience know that you're happy to talk about the issue, but you will only do so on your terms. You may want to disregard the question altogether, but it's better to bridge into the answer you want to give than to outright say that you won't answer it.

This won't be Fox News; the reporter likely isn't baiting you into a trap to score political points. If they ask a question that offends you or frames our work in a way that is negative, it is more likely that they are ignorant of the topic. Use it as an opportunity to educate them.



AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Even after the formal interview ends, exercise care with your words. If you're still on the phone with the reporter, assume that you're still on the record. Even if the reporter has explicitly said that they are done recording, assume that you can still be quoted. It's better to assume you're always on the record with a reporter than it is to say something that you regret.

After your interview, we recommend these steps:

1. Ask the reporter when the article/story will run.
2. Send a thank you email with any relevant materials or information you didn't or could not provide during the interview.
3. Follow the reporter on Twitter.
4. After the story is published, share the story with your networks and the CWS Communications team (media@cwsglobal.org).

If you're still on the phone with the reporter, assume that you're still on the record.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCE:

[Writing & Pitching Yourself to Members of the Press and Opinion Editorials](#)
(This document is framed towards CWS's refugee resettlement work, but there are universal lessons in it that you should consider.)



Don't forget! You can reach the Communications Team anytime at media@CWSGlobal.org.