



How to prepare for media interviews about poverty

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The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) and On Road Media are working together to explore how the UK media talks about poverty, and to support people with experience of poverty through mentoring, peer support and media skills training.

Talking to the media can be a powerful way of having your voice and experiences heard. It can help lead to change, whether to policies or attitudes. People can find speaking to the media empowering and enjoyable.

The majority of journalists have good intentions and a desire to report accurately and hold people in power to account. Their work is a skilled profession, in a pressurised environment where they are expected to produce stories quickly. Many want to shine a light on the challenges people are facing – they often look to do that through sharing people's personal experiences.

If you are speaking to the media, it's about being careful, preparing thoroughly and taking care of yourself.

This short, practical guide is designed to help grassroots organisations and people with experience of and expertise on poverty or low incomes to prepare for media interviews or conversations with journalists.

It starts with a checklist of things to think about, gives you some tips on how to look after yourself when speaking to the media, and finishes with some specific guidance on talking about Universal Credit.

You might also find it useful to read our [Framing Toolkit](#), which explains how we talk about poverty at JRF, and gives examples of how to do this effectively to win hearts and minds.

Interview checklist and tips for how to look after yourself

Questions to consider when working with the media

- Why am I choosing to do this interview? Is it because I want to or feel obliged to?
- Is now a good time for me to be doing an interview? How do I feel right now?
- Who will I call for support if I need to at any point?
- Who can I take with me to the interview? Have I confirmed that they're available?
- How am I going to feel in an hour, a day, a week after the interview? What will I need?

Basic information – who and what

- Find out the name and contact details of the journalist. Get everything in writing from them via email after your initial chat. Get all agreements in writing so you have a paper trail for reference.
- Who do they work for and where will the item appear, for example radio, online, TV, print?
- What type of item is it, for example news, comment, analysis?
- Tell them you will get back to them with a decision, so you have time to think about it.

Questions for the journalists – why, where, when, how

- Why are they talking to you? What's the context?
- Ask to see questions beforehand. Tell them if there's anything you don't want to talk about.
- Are they interviewing anyone else?
- Who is the audience? Ask about ratings and/or listeners.
- Is it live or pre-recorded? When will your contribution be used?
- Where and when are you needed? How long will they need you for?
- Are you comfortable with where they are doing the interview? Are they keen to meet you in your home? How do you feel about this?
- What do they need for the interview? For example, to see you with family, at community centre or at work.
- How will your contribution be used?
- Can you see the final copy/edit and/or see the quotes they've used and maybe the headline? Usually it's a 'no' because of editorial policy, but it's always worth asking.

Payment and logistics

- Will you be paid or reimbursed for this engagement? How much?
- Are travel expenses covered? Can they arrange a taxi to take you to/from the interview?
- If it's an early interview and live, can they offer you accommodation if you need to travel far?

Interview tips

- Remember – you are in control of the interview. It's OK to stop talking. It's OK to pull out and never too late.
- Research the journalist beforehand – on Twitter or Instagram, their previous articles or programmes.
- Focus on three main things – key points – you want the audience to remember, understand or do.
- Lead your messages with a shared value (for help with framing your message, use the [JRF Framing Toolkit](#)).
- Tell stories, share anecdotes, and give examples – make sure you prepare well ahead of the interview.
- Avoid complicated statistics or jargon. Keep it simple and succinct. It's a conversation, remember.
- End the interview on a positive note. Email them to say thanks. Ask for a link or recording of the interview.

Practising self-care and community support when working with the media

- Have a network that can care for you and be there when you need them. Encourage community support.
- You can stop a prospective interview if you realise you're not the right person to be discussing the matter, and you can suggest others to the journalist if you want to. Practise saying no.
- If it's a challenging situation or it feels uncomfortable, ask yourself if there's any point engaging. Is it worth it?
- Ask someone to look over the media request – get a second opinion before you say yes or no.
- If you go ahead, ask for perspectives or feedback about a piece from the journalist and peers.

- Be aware of the repercussions of the interview, not just on you but potentially your family as well – will you feel okay if the interview goes viral/is shared multiple times or receives negative responses?
- Afterwards, consider nominating a friend to look through social media or comments and give you an update or round-up of the positive bits.
- Consider switching off your phone/social media following the interview.
- Eat enough food. Drink plenty of water. Warm water before an interview can help prepare your voice.
- Give yourself a break from the issue once in a while. Take your head out of it.

Whether you do the interview or not, give yourself a pat on the back and treat yourself to something nice.

Universal Credit media interviews

Background

Universal Credit has been a hot topic in the media in recent months, particularly as the rollout has been causing problems for some people. Journalists are increasingly asking to speak to people to share their experiences.

You may have already spoken to journalists about Universal Credit (UC) or you may be interested in doing so in future. We've prepared this guidance to support you with this, and have included what we've learned from people's experiences so far.

Requests for your address and National Insurance number

When speaking to people on UC, some journalists have asked people to share their postal address and National Insurance number.

Journalists have told us this is to enable the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to give a thorough 'right of reply'.

A right of reply is a comment or response to a story in order to give a balance of views, namely to give an organisation the chance to defend themselves in light of criticism, and correct potential inaccuracies.

We have been told the DWP insists to journalists they get and share this information in recent months, so they can check the circumstances of the person's claim.

What to do if you are asked

We have had a mixed experience with journalists requesting this information: some ask for the information in all circumstances; others have ignored the requests from DWP.

If you are asked, you are under **no obligation** to share your National Insurance number with a journalist.

We are clear that neither the journalist nor the DWP need this information in order to issue a right of reply.

For instance, if you are speaking about general issues regarding the policy design of UC (for example, the five-week wait or receiving an advance), there is no need to look at your information specifically.

Politely decline the request to the journalist, saying you are not comfortable sharing that information, and contact your charity's media team if you are unsure.

What will this mean for the story?

The story may or may not run. The experience so far has been mixed.

Some people who have withheld their NI number have still seen their experiences used in stories.

But the point is, **it is entirely your choice** and **you have control** over what information you choose to share.

You may or may not choose to do so. JRF and On Road Media can provide advice and guidance on this.

Approached in person?

If a journalist approaches you in person, and you have not arranged to meet or speak to them via JRF/On Road/your charity:

- We advise you do not speak to journalists in these circumstances
- Try to remain calm and politely ask the journalist's name, what publication or outlet they work for and their contact number – many will have businesses cards they can easily share.
- Do not share your personal contact information. You should always remember that no information you share is off the record. You are not obliged to answer any questions on the spot.
- Once they have shared their details with you, say you will consider whether you would like to speak to them, but not right now in these circumstances.
- Bring the conversation to a close, remaining calm at all times, and not responding directly to any detailed questions they ask about you.
- If they will not share their details, bring the conversation to a close, move on, and continue with your business. We'd suggest returning home where possible.
- Consider making your social media accounts private to view for people who are not friends or followers.
- Contact your charity's media contact to let them know about the approach and seek their advice.

If you do go ahead with the interview

After speaking with your charity and thinking about whether you would like to be interviewed, you could decide you want to speak to the journalist who has approached you.

This could be through a written statement, which your charity can help prepare, or by agreeing to be interviewed on the phone or in person.

Research the journalist who has contacted you – your charity and JRF/On Road may have worked with them previously.

If you do, refer back to the interview checklist above. Make sure you have someone who can support you, either in person or on the phone, who knows your boundaries and can help you prepare and look after yourself afterwards. This may be from an organisation or trusted friend.

Do not feel obliged to answer all potential questions related to your financial circumstances – in particular copies of personal documents such as account statements and bills. These are personal to you and you do not need to show them to anyone else.

Before the interview, remember to set your boundaries - ask the journalist to set out what questions they would like to ask, ideally in writing, and what you have agreed to share.

Looking after yourself online after an interview

Consider how other people will react to your interview – whether critics within or outside the community, or people congratulating you, or others asking you for help. Make a plan for how you'll manage this.

- Ask a friend to watch/listen to your interview, and give you some feedback, if you'd prefer not to see or hear it but still want to know how it went.
- Think about changing your publicity settings– that includes old blogs that you've maybe had online and forgotten about, and social media accounts.



Critics on social media/on articles

- Get a friend to review the comments on an article or underneath a Facebook post or tweet. Ask them to give you a sense of people's comments, if that's better than not knowing at all.
- Set your Twitter account to only see notifications from people you follow.
- Ask a friend to manage your account and delete any offensive direct messages or Facebook messages.
- If you talk to critics on social media, think about what you want to achieve. Do you think you can win the person over? Or will you exhaust yourself engaging with them? Remember that a lot of pleasure for critics comes from feeling like they've been noticed, like they've had an impact.
- Block people who are consistently sending you abuse on social media. Report abusive tweets or messages first of all to the social media site, and if necessary to the police.
- Leave a pinned tweet or Facebook post letting people know you're trying to take a break from social media. You'll be back, but you won't be able to respond to the comments and messages.
- It's a good plan to turn off your phone and computer to avoid seeing any negative comments, but you may then become anxious about what is being said online without your knowledge. In that case, limit your time online. Hand your phone over to someone. At least turn your phone off or set it to airplane mode when you go to bed.
- Call a friend; ask them to come to your house. Have offline conversations.

People congratulating you and asking for help

After an interview, people may get in touch and share their story, perhaps asking for help or wanting to connect. This can be moving, but overwhelming. These stories could be upsetting and difficult to read in large numbers. Consider skimming these messages or not reading them at all. Have a message ready to send if you'd still like to respond, for example: "Thank you for sharing your story with me. I'm sorry that I can't help you myself, but there are some brilliant organisations that can. Here's a link to some of them..."

Journalists contacting you online

Journalists often find stories on social media and contact people they'd like to speak to about a topic via Twitter, Instagram or Facebook (e.g. Messenger). If you've spoken publicly about a topic and your full name is in the media, journalists may easily find you through a simple Google search. This is a positive thing because your voice is out there, however, you may not want to be overwhelmed by journalists or reporters reaching out.

Our advice is if you want to prevent this from being overwhelming, consider changing your privacy settings so people can't contact you directly easily. You can change settings on Facebook so people can't search you easily or send you a message on Facebook Messenger, and you can make your Twitter account more private so it limits who sees your tweets and who can contact you with direct messages.

Have a chat with an organisation or friend about this, so that when a story breaks, which you may have commented on before, they can support you if journalists are suddenly asking you to comment. It is better to be prepared for this as news stories are often covered in a short space of time.

Contact

If you have any questions, queries or require any support, please contact:

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