Reflections on Public Engagement: Radio, Journalists, and Public Lectures

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In March 2023 I presented my PhD research to members of the public at the University of Reading's annual Fairbrother lecture (University of Reading, 2023a). To secure this opportunity I responded to a call put forward by the graduate school and gave a short presentation on my proposed topic. This public lecture focused on how automatic facial recognition (AFR) technology is used by police and private security. This talk discussed my PhD research on how AFR surveillance impacts human, data, and equality rights (University of Reading, 2023b). The lecture received over 100 registrations and was well attended. In the run-up to the talk, I undertook additional public engagement activities through appearing on the local radio and speaking to a journalist from a national newspaper. These opportunities were secured by the University of Reading's communications team and were primarily used to promote the lecture.

Receiving such attention was an incredibly rewarding experience, as I was able to develop my academic profile. However, given the controversial nature of policing and facial recognition surveillance (Dermody, 2019), communicating clear and accurate information to the public on the practical and legal risks of facial recognition was no easy feat. As an early career researcher stepping into public discourse, maintaining a positive public image was important to me. In my case, having a favourable public profile meant keeping the discussion balanced so I did not alienate either police or non-governmental organisations from getting involved in future research.

Reflecting on my personal experiences, the following provides an insight into the importance of public engagement through radio, news outlets, and public forums. This discussion encourages researchers to think about public engagement as early as possible, as each format is unique and provides different opportunities to share findings and engage in an ongoing dialog.

Appearing on the Radio

With the upcoming Fairbrother lecture, news of my research spread across the University. Given the topical nature of facial recognition it was not long until I was contacted by the University communication teams about appearing on the Phil Kennedy show (BBC Radio Berkshire). The purpose of this radio interview was to give members of the public an insight into the University of Reading and promote my upcoming lecture.

Due to the conversational nature of radio, it can be hard to predict the questions you will receive. At the start of the interview, I received standard introductory questions, such as “what is facial recognition?”, “how does facial recognition work?”, “and where is facial recognition used?”. It can be tempting to give a complete overview of the research when answering questions. However, given the limited time and varied background knowledge of the audience, I used short and simple soundbites to put points across clearly. Due to the informal style of questions, the discussion strayed into areas my research had not covered. For example, I was asked about the accuracy of facial recognition. This question focused on the technical side of facial recognition, which I have limited knowledge on. In this instance, I said I was unsure of the answer, but I offered insights into the issues of facial recognition accuracy. For example, I discussed how facial recognition systems can produce discriminatory results if the images they are trained on are not representative of the general population.

I found the key to radio was to break down my research into clear and concise points. This helped me keep the conversation light and engaging to audiences. The conversation can take unexpected turns and you might be asked questions that are not completely related to your research. I found it best to these develops in my stride and enjoy the experience.

Speaking to Journalists

With the promotion of my public lecture, I found myself becoming increasingly associated with facial recognition. When a journalist from a national newspaper spoke to the communications team about a facial recognition piece they were writing - my name came to mind.

One key point to note about journalists is the time constraints they work within, which means you may only have a day (or less) to prepare for the interview. I recommend having a pre-prepared research summary. This summary should include the background of your research, areas in the field needing development, and how your work addresses this. Having research summary provided me with a quick reference point that assisted me during my telephone interview with the journalist. This helped address one of the biggest challenges: providing simple, understandable, and accurate depictions of my research. However, despite my best efforts, the interview focused on broader discussions of AFR use, which resulted in key points getting lost throughout the conversation. This was reflected in how I was quoted,

which summarised the overall discussion into a simple but inaccurate statement of fact. Despite rewriting the quote, for reasons unknown to me, it was not included in the final print. This could have been due to the relevance of the quote or simply cut by the editor for space.

If I were to be interviewed again, I would start by asking whether the journalist is looking for a broader discussion or a quote. Having this understanding would have prevented me going into too much background and having my main points lost in a sea of irrelevant explanation. In a similar vein, I was always in control of how my research was represented. I asked for certain points not to be quoted the way the journalist had phrased them. I always had the option to withdraw if I was still unhappy with how my research was represented. This option to withdraw was very important, as I felt that it was best to have my research represented correctly or not at all.

Presenting to the public

The main event was the Fairbrother Lecture. This presentation took three months of planning and was supported by the graduate school and my supervisors. The most important part of the process was refining content to make it accessible to a non-specialist audience. Previously I only had presented in the academic context, which resulted in the first draft being technical and inaccessible. Based on feedback from the graduate school, the focus of the talk shifted away from the content (the substance of my PhD) towards the narrative of the presentation. To bring the discussion to life, the talk was framed around real-world examples of AFR and how the audience sees this in their daily lives. During the early stages of planning, I invested significant time into understanding how my audience would engage with the concepts and ideas. On the day of the presentation, I arrived at the venue early and practiced the talk. Being able to spend time practicing in the room helped me get comfortable with the environment and build confidence.

Once the talk finished there was a question-and-answer session. Due to the controversial nature of AFR within policing I was aware this talk would attract a range of different viewpoints. For example, during the Q&A there was a dialog about *the suitability of* AFR when identifying and tracking potential witnesses to crimes (Biometrics and Surveillance Camera Commissioner, 2023). Many questions came from a place of genuine interest and curiosity, however, there was one exception. This question focused on why they believed I was incorrect and how my research was framed unfairly against the police. I experienced this as hostile, but fortunately I had previous experience with hostile questions and recognised they were likely trying to agitate me to prove a point. I have found when dealing with hostile questions take a step back and acknowledge the core point of the question, as it is best not to be dismissive or rude. Answering these questions calmy and respectful will only work in your favour, as it will often be clear to the audience that some

questions are only asked to undermine or antagonise. In responding I relied upon official government sources to support my reasoning, which demonstrated how and why I had reached my conclusions. Despite the unpleasantness of such a directly hostile question, because of the way I handled it, after the talk I was complimented on how I answered the question.

When engaging directly with the public, I kept in mind that whilst the audience was interested in this area, they might have little or no background knowledge. Therefore, I kept the information simple and introduced new concepts clearly. I focused on the narrative and made sure it was relatable and easy to follow. I found when answering questions that many people had a genuine interest, however a small number sought to undermine or antagonise. When that happened, I made sure I was respectful and tried my best to answer the question.

Conclusion

This reflection piece has provided an insight into my personal experiences of public engagement. Whether it be through radio, news outlets, or public forums being prepared to answer questions and provide a clear understanding is key. In all instances, take the time to understand your audience and what they expect from you. Lasty, throughout this experience I often took time to reflect and appreciate the opportunity. Promoting new understandings and challenging current narratives is what my research strives towards, and this process provided an amazing platform I will always be grateful for.

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