

Psychiatry and the media

Media training

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The College's opinion on a number of issues is being sought by the media and the opportunities to put our point of view over must be used to the best advantage. The television interview is the most potent medium.

The Dean, Registrar and Public Education Officer had a session of media training on 23 June 1989 at the Robin Brooke Centre in St Bartholomew's Hospital. The organiser was Jill Phillipson, our publicity officer, and our tutors were Jill Cochrane, an experienced TV interviewer and Mike Kilcooley, a communications expert.

The training lasted 3½ hours with much hilarity and the occasional wince thrown in. At the initial attempt in the hot seat, it was clear that one participant was much more naive than the other two, who had appeared on television before or who had had some media training. It quickly became apparent that charming interviewers were the most dangerous, luring the unwary away from the relevant issues and then pitching them into deep waters of controversy or knocking them with a broadside on a delicate or personal issue.

The technique appears to be in marked contrast with that adopted in Court under cross examination where every question must be politely answered. On television, there is only a very short period of a few minutes and the cost of each minute is enormous as is the potential audience of 16 million.

While a cool demeanour is to be recommended in Court, more liveliness or even a show of emotion captures the attention of the television viewers.

Each participant had three turns in the hot seat. The lessons we learned were:

First – a list of at most three essential points should be written out and preferably kept in view. Second – the interviewer may be controlled by saying "May I finish" or "I am here to discuss 'x' and not 'y'". We knew on whom to model ourselves.

Third – never touch anything in the studio as that could provoke a strike.

Fourth – do not relax until told all is finished. We were mildly embarrassed by our collapse, faithfully recorded on video after the first exposures.

The Prime Minister is to be appreciated as the very model of media training. We were treated to a rare piece of BBC archive in which Robin Day actually succeeded in putting her in her place. We have all become avid connoisseurs of late night news programmes. Never mind the contents, let's watch the technique. Finally, the lessons we learnt were aptly summarised by a piece of Bob Newhart comedy.

Members may be reassured to learn that there will not be dramatic changes to the style and colour of the officers' hair and we will be dressed in much the same way. Idiosyncratic wardrobes in the wearing of controversial badges or ties detract from the main purpose of the interview.

Media training was great fun and certainly builds up confidence. We were all told to practise on our families. Follow-up data on quality of relationships after media training is awaited with interest.

The experience of appearing on television is exhilarating but could be seductive, leading to serious addiction.