

Doing a Media Interview? Tempted?

Make sure it's not Poly in, Garbage Out

Whether you are going on Jerry Springer or just want to explain poly to your best friend, these media tips should help you get your message across clearly.

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Why do Polys need to be media savvy?

Like it or not, the idea of polyamory is attractive to the media. Stories on polyamory have been appearing regularly over the past few years. Not all of them have been complimentary. There may be some journalists who cover polyamory because they see it as a viable alternative to monogamy. Others are just looking for a sex story to boost their ratings, and a few may even be looking for a sacrificial lamb to throw to the monogamous wolves. In any case, being interviewed entails the risk of being misquoted, poorly edited, or downright abused.

Before acquiescing to any interview, you must always consider how “out” you want to be. It is easier to be anonymous in print than on the air. If you are on a local TV show in San Francisco, it is unlikely your great aunt in Peoria will hear about it, but you never know. Even if you are fine being out yourself, you need to be careful not to expose others who might not be so comfortable. Even if you arrange to be anonymous, you still need to take care how much detail you include about where you live, your profession, ethnicity, etc. It is surprising how few details can identify you to someone who knows you.

In the face of these risks, there are at least two reasons for polys to do media interviews. One is to provide support for other polys and poly inclined folks. They will benefit from seeing poly role models and learning about the publications, email lists, web sites, and discussion groups the poly community has to offer. We can encourage others to join our ranks. I think growing the community is a good thing.

The other reason to cooperate with the media is self-protection. Polys are a marginalized minority. We are, on occasion, subject to prejudice, misunderstanding, ridicule, and, albeit rarely, legal abuse. Our multi-partner unions do not receive the benefits and respect of the law or society that monogamous unions have. Our best defense is to tell our truth. We need to get our story to the public as often, as loud, and, especially, as clear as possible. To do this, we need to understand how the media works and put considerable effort into presenting poly to the media.

This article is not designed to tell you what to say about poly. That is your first job when you are contemplating giving a media interview or going on a show. You will have a limited amount of time or ink. Even if you are interviewed for twenty minutes, it is likely that only 20 seconds or a few sentences will make it into the final show or article. It is important to sort through all the things you might say and settle on two or three most important points. Much of this article is concerned with the art of crafting your message and practicing how to deliver it.

Do Thorough Research

When the media gives you a ring, it is very important to decide if the reporter or show host will allow you to get your message out in one piece. You need to do your homework and know what you are getting into.

- Watch several shows or read several columns. Ask around about a show's reputation. Ask other media people, political activists, etc. Look for hosts or writers with a good reputation.
- You want to make sure that the journalist is even-handed and friendly, not devious, rude, or sarcastic. Do they practice ambush journalism, sneaking up on people and thrusting microphones in their faces? Do they salt their audiences with abrasive or antagonistic skills who might drown out your message?
- Know who else is going to be invited to speak on the show and research these guests. It might even be good to talk to them beforehand. After all, isn't “no surprises” one of our most treasured poly adages?

- Understand the format of the show. Know how much time you will have and what the physical arrangement will be.
- Try to make sure, if you are making a recording for later broadcast, that they don't use cutaways. This is the practice of asking a question in a nice way, and then recording the same question with a snide or disapproving tone, or even different wording, when you are not present. Later they can edit the negative question onto your answer which might give the segment a much different spin than you intended.

Preparing Your Remarks

Remember, once it's out of your mouth, there is no "undo" key. You can ask to speak off the record, particularly with print journalists, but it is not easy to be off the record on a live broadcast. A good print journalist will recheck your quotes with you. In general, however, you will have no editorial control over your contribution.

- Make a list of the important points you want to communicate and prioritize them. Examine the list to make sure each point is on topic for the interview you have been invited to do. Sometimes you can discuss the questions a journalist wants to ask or even suggest some to them.
- Flesh out your remarks. Detailed personal examples are best, not just something you read in a book. Again, be careful not to out your poly partners and friends. It might be best to talk to them and have a clear agreement as to how they want to be referred to - by name, pseudonym, or not at all.
- It is good to repeat comments, or summaries of them, if they bring home your most important points.
- Start a list of pithy, colorful and accurate phrases, and metaphors to make your points memorable
- Humor is good, but it shouldn't be sarcastic, put others down, or be self-deprecating.
- Avoid obscure language and jargon, which is a big turn-off to audiences. Never use abbreviations like LDR or NRE. However "compersion" would be a good word to explain when talking about jealousy. Just make sure you are able to explain it fully and clearly.
- Avoid gratuitously divisive, provocative, or angry language, or personal attacks.
- Think about how your remarks could be taken out of context.
- Avoid dwelling on problems or pitfalls of poly. You might do 20 minutes about the joys of poly and 1 minute about a problem you had, and find that all they air is the one minute problem portion. I am not advocating dishonesty. I am advocating focus. Possible strategies to deflect questions about problems include pointing out that polys don't appear to have more problems than monos, and that poly emphasis on communication helps polys get over rough spots better. In other words, talk about how polys solve problems, not about some really yukky thing that happened to you last year.
- Be prepared for the SEX questions. Yes, sex is probably on the dirty little minds of many interviewers, but you don't have to give them what they want. Don't say anything you are not comfortable saying. Your agreements about how much information you share among your lovers and your safer sex agreements are possibly more relevant than whether you use feathers or floggers.
- For radio or TV, keep each point down to 15 seconds or less, if possible. The longer you make your preamble to a point, the more likely you are to be cut off by the host before you actually get to say the important part. Digression is your enemy.
- Think about what show and tell you might bring to an interview. This might include books, photos, Loving More magazine, or a card with the URL of your local poly group or a phone number to call to find out about poly events in your area. Have a printed list of contact information and resources. Most TV stations can scroll these across the screen at the end of your segment. Send this in advance and ask how they will make the information available to the audience.

Use a Coach to Help You Practice Your Remarks

- Find a coach to help you practice your remarks. I can't emphasize too much how valuable feedback is in perfecting your presentation. It is best to video your practice sessions, watch them, and do them again. Video them even if you are doing a phone interview with a print journalist. Find the most media savvy person you know to help you. If you don't know anyone with media experience, it is still extremely helpful to have someone ask questions and critique your presentation. Start this process a week or two before your interview. It takes a while to learn a presentation, change body language habits, and get comfortable in an interview situation.
- Run your remarks past your coach for comments and editing.
- Practice your remarks by yourself, in front of a mirror, three or four times.

- Try to keep your delivery slow and deliberate. Eliminate ums and uhs, a short silence is much better. This is one very good reason for watching a video of yourself.
- Simulate the interview situation using your coach as the interviewer. Start with polite questions and move to pointed, off the wall, or downright rude questions. The coach should simulate loud and aggressive questioning styles.
- **THE PRIME DIRECTIVE:** Learn to use any question as a springboard to the information you really want to give. For example, if someone asserts that poly is against God's Law, it could lead to a theological discussion or a sarcastic answer. Assuming you wish to avoid both of these options, you might answer, "The love and caring in my relationships is part of my strong spiritual life." Then you can segue into comments about how your poly partners are helpful in times of need, or other points you have prioritized. This is probably the single most important technique for dealing with interviews.
- The second most important thing is not indulge in digressions or off-topic remarks. Keep your limited time in mind. Digressions confuse your audience and waste the small amount of time you have to get your poly points across. If you met a poly partner at a swing party, nudist festival, pagan ritual or church picnic, just say you met at a social gathering. You don't want to imply that poly goes hand in hand with other minority beliefs and you don't want to spend time discussing or defending these other concepts.
- Have your coach simulate the three most likely kinds of anti-poly talk show callers or guests. When dealing with a strongly negative guest or caller, keep your cool, don't shout, but calmly ask for your turn to talk. If the host won't quiet rude guests or audience members, walk out.
 - Religious fundamentalists: Don't get into shouting matches with them, but be clear you don't accept their minority point of view. Let them know that polys come from all religious, racial and ethnic backgrounds, including fundamental Christianity.
 - People with bad poly experiences or pseudo-poly experiences like swinging or adultery: Don't contradict their experience, but point it out if what they did wasn't really poly or is not the usual poly experience. Speak about your positive experience and what you do to create good poly relationships.
 - "Experts" with no knowledge or experience of real polys: I once heard Dr. Ruth say she had never seen a successful open marriage. Poly negative "experts" tend to spout unfounded imaginings or site dysfunctional clients who had bad poly experiences. You can note that successful polys wouldn't go to them because of their prejudice, so they never see successful polys. Also note that these "experts" have not made an effort to learn about successful poly relationships. Point out, gently, that it is dishonest scholarship, at best, to offer baseless opinions as if they were facts.
- You and your coach should be sure to consider your body language and facial expressions as well as your tone of voice. There are plenty of books and articles on this subject. You might want to look at a few. The important thing is that you want convey that you are comfortable and enthusiastic about polyamory.

Technical Considerations

- Arrive early. Make sure you know when you are expected to arrive for an interview, and don't be late. Even if you are not being broadcast live, television and radio studios and staff are tightly scheduled. Print journalists have deadlines.
- Think about your appearance for TV. Be sure not to wear anything, even socks, that is white, as white causes glare. Ask the show staff what to wear. Dress conservatively. Don't wear a t-shirt with a slogan that distracts from the points you want to make. Be who you are, but remember you are trying to get people to think reasonably about poly. They won't do that if you distract them with your dress, etc.
- For radio, talk into the microphone and always try to stay the same distance from the mic during the show.
- For television, look directly into the camera, not at the host or studio audience. The active camera will have a little blinking red light on it.
- If the interview is on your turf, think about the physical environment. Even for print interviews it communicates strongly about who you are. If you choose the interview site, choose a neutral place with no distractions or off topic connotations.

Sample Questions

- Why did you change from being monogamous to being polyamorous?

- How did you feel when your partner started having what most of us would call an affair with another person?
- How do you make time for all these other relationships and all these other people? Isn't poly a lot of work?
- Do you go off with your girlfriend while your wife cleans the house? Is it OK if she doesn't have a date?
- So who is sleeping with whom here?
- Do you all have sex at once? Does your husband get it on with your boyfriend?
- How do you handle money in your relationships?
- Does seeing your husband with another woman make you feel inadequate?
- Are you ever jealous? How do you deal with jealousy?
- How do you answer all the therapists who explain that poly is adopted by people who are either fleeing something they don't like in their partner, or trying to deal with their own low self-esteem?
- Aren't you afraid of getting AIDS or some other disease?
- Doesn't this polyamory go against the grain of the Judeo-Christian ethic that is the foundation of our society?
- How can you say you have a commitment to your spouse if you are fooling around with other people?
- What makes you think you can get away with adultery?
- Is your one-woman-living-with-two-men arrangement really just a way to hide a homosexual relationship between the two men?
- Why do you have the need to have more than one sex partner?
- The Bible is against this, you are going straight to Hell!
- This fooling around may be fine for you, but aren't you concerned about how much harm you are doing to your children?
- How do your children handle explaining your weird relationships to their peers?

Maximize the Impact of Your Interview

Your interview does not need to be an isolated event. It can be used to help grow your poly community and aid your personal growth as well. And it can be a lot of fun.

- If you will be on a show that has a studio audience or call-in questions, get as many polys as possible to attend or call in. Urge them to think about what they will say. If they are going to be in the audience, they should be enthusiastic, but never rude.
- Suggest topics for other articles or shows to the interviewer. If the interviewer's piece on "What is Poly" is successful, perhaps they will follow up with "Children in Poly Homes" or "How to Handle Jealousy."
- Make sure there is an entry-level poly event that you can promote during your interview. This could be a lecture, panel discussion, or potluck. Don't miss this chance to grow your community.
- Be sure to keep a record of your interview. Tape broadcasts, keep copies of articles, and keep the materials you used to prepare for the interview.
- Critique your interview with your coach and friends. Did you get your points across and achieve your goals? What would you do differently next time? Keep some notes for next time.
- Send a thank you note to the journalist who did the interview.
- Have as many polys as possible send letters or call to support the show or article. If there were problems with the interview, let the interviewer and their bosses know it.
- After the show is aired or the interview is printed, have a party and celebrate.

Sidebar I

Any of Us Can Use the Web to Spread the Word

Quite apart from traditional media outlets or expensive advertising, the Internet allows us to reach large numbers of people, often in a targeted way, at virtually no expense and with a minimum of work. Any individual can do this, or we could brainstorm a more organized approach on the Polyactive list (sign up for it on the Loving More site:)

<http://lovemore.com/emailgroups.html>)

One way to go about this is to find affinity groups which interest you and get on their email lists. Affinity groups are groups that deal with issues that are relevant or tangential to the issues and concerns of polyamory. Some obvious groups include any that are about relationships, marriage, divorce, or adultery. The sex-positive communities, bdsm, spiritual sexuality, swinging, etc. are naturals, too. Less obvious groups that have a poly constituency are the Society for Creative Anachronism, science fiction groups, pagan groups, and communal living groups. The regional science fiction convention in the Northwest has had poly workshops for the past few years. There have been several heated discussions about poly on the national cohousing list.

It is probably not a good idea to jump onto a new list and say, "I'm poly, wuddayagonna do about it?" Rather it is always a good idea to lurk on a list for a few weeks and get a feel for it. Eventually there will be an opening in the conversation that will allow you to mention poly. As always, it is probably best to site your own good experience with poly. Don't suggest that everyone who doesn't see the wisdom of being poly is a moron (true as that might be.) You can then decide, based on the tone and interest level of the list, if you want to post a list of poly resources. In the long run, working the Web may increase our numbers, our supporters, and dispel the myths about us at least as effectively as being on a few sensational talk shows.

Sidebar II

Taking the Poly Story to the Media

You can also take a pro-active approach to the media. Pitch a poly article or show concept. You might suggest a spokesperson or small group for a broadcast. You might invite a print journalist to a poly meeting or potluck. In Seattle a group of polys produced a TV show about poly which they broadcast on the local community access cable channel. You might be able to get an op-ed piece in a local newspaper. Even if a journalist rejects your idea about doing a story on poly, you have made that person aware of poly and they now know where to find and articulate spokesperson. In the future they may include something about poly as a minor point in a more mainstream article on marriage, divorce, or adultery. Every little bit helps.

The media is interested in events that are open to the public. If you bring a nationally recognized proponent of poly to your area to give a talk or lead a workshop, you should be able to stir up some press. Your hired gun can plug your local events as well as their book and lecture. There might be local educators, therapists, or clergy who would be willing talk about poly or marriage/relationship issues that could include poly. Lobby one of your local movie theaters to show "When Two Won't Do." Suggest a special night with a panel of poly people to do a Q&A after the show. If they won't show it, rent a small hall and do it your selves.

An event can be a very good springboard to get media attention. Just remember to plan well before approaching the media. Make sure everyone you want to involve in the project is on board and knows what messages they want to impart. In most cities there will be some organization that helps non-profits learn how to work with the media, write press releases, and they may even have a local media list.

About the author: John Ullman, poly since 1967, was an agent and manager for performing artists for 28 years. His work included arranging promotional appearances for his clients and preparing them for media interviews. He first learned to work with the media as a consumer and environmental activist at OSPIRG, the first Public Interest Research Group inspired by Ralph Nader in the early 1970's. John's academic background is in molecular biology. He is currently consulting in marketing, PR, and events management in Seattle, WA. John is on the board of the Foundation and Center for Sex Positive Culture. His email address is: John@tradarts.com.