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Issue Date: Government Communicators Insider
October 2006

**Stopping the interview on national television—was it a
good decision?**

[Daniel Dunne](#)

FDA press representatives pull the plug on ABC News

*"There are times when it's best to terminate an interview before things get
out of hand."*

--Government Press Representative

How would you react if a reporter fails to abide by a set of pre-determined
interview guidelines (i.e., asking questions about "off-limit" issues) during
an on-camera interview with an official from your agency?

Not long ago, a [Food and Drug Administration](#) (FDA) press representative
was faced with this dilemma and declared an in-progress, on-camera
interview with an FDA doctor "over."

Specifically, ABC's interest in speaking with the FDA centered on the
federal government's approval of a study that allowed trauma center staff
in two dozen cities to provide serious accident victims with experimental
blood substitute [PolyHeme](#). At the time that ABC's interview was
arranged, PolyHeme was in the final stages of randomized phase III
clinical trials.

FDA officials advised ABC that they would be unable to discuss specifics
issues (i.e., safety of PolyHeme) related to the clinical trials, but could
address FDA-approved guidelines developed by the doctor being
interviewed. Despite this mutual agreement, the FDA's doctor was
ambushed with a host of questions related to the clinical trials, including
PolyHeme, when the cameras were on.

All of the media-training experts *GCI* talked with regarding this issue
agreed that while government press representatives have the authority to
interrupt and stop on-camera interviews, this action (a third-party
attempting to control the outcome of an on-going interview they arranged)
should be avoided at all costs. It's not in the best interest of their
agency.

For example, TJ Walker, president of [Media Training Worldwide](#) told *GCI*
that when issues of public safety arise (i.e., health issues), public
expectation is that government officials should be as transparent as
possible. Thus, the best time to exercise control of the interview is in
adequate preparation (being prepared), not as someone who appears to
censor agency comments. "It makes you look defensive and guilty,"
Walker says.

If, during the interview, the reporter violates your agreement and elects to
ambush the interviewee with questions on issues not agreed upon, the
interviewee can tell the reporter in a positive manner that since they are
not the subject matter expert (or best expert) on the issue, it would not be
appropriate for them to discuss the issue.

The interviewee could also point out that their agency's public affairs staff
that assisted the news organization with the story can help them after the
interview. If the reporter persists in asking the same questions, the
interviewee needs to be disciplined and **stay on message** (about not
being the best expert to address the issue) without appearing defensive!

Despite this advice, many government communicators interviewed for

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this story emphasized that if the media fail to play by established interview rules, reporters should not be allowed to film an interview with agency representatives—and thus, stepping in front of a television camera to terminate an interview is justified.

FDA press officials advised *GCI* that their decision to terminate the interview was a “judgment call” based on the false pretense presented by *ABC News* regarding the nature of the interview.

Having been on both sides of the fence, my advice to communicators is to remember that perceptions mean everything. Base your actions in managing media interviews on this fact!

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