

Public Education of Psychology: An Interview with Philip G. Zimbardo, PhD

Philip G. Zimbardo

Editor's Note: This interview was conducted in 2000 and edited by Dr. Zimbardo in 2021. Dr. Zimbardo was a pioneer in the field through his work with the media and his commitment to educate the public about psychological science, long before it had become popular to do so. His responses in this interview are still remarkably relevant today.

1. Psychology and the Media

By disseminating findings from psychological research and promoting psychological services to the public, the media serves an important function benefiting the public and our field. Psychologists early in their career can serve an important role as consultants to trade media, community media outlets, or even national/international media conglomerates. We asked Dr. Phil Zimbardo to discuss his vision for the role of the media in psychology, his advice for psychologists who are contacted by the media, and also to discuss his own ground-breaking experiences with the media on behalf of psychology over the years.

2. Importance of Media Involvement among Psychologists

Interviewer (MJP): What do you think is the current public image of psychology as a field?

PGZ: I think that the incident and experiences around September 11th have helped to create a more positive and accurate image of psychology for the public. The public has become more aware of psychologists contributing their services as therapists in New York and Washington and elsewhere. I know the APA website was used very extensively by the general public at this time. The whole concept of posttraumatic stress disorder and the important effects of stress and anxiety in our lives really became salient after 9–11, and I think psychologists have responded expertly and admirably in response to these events.

But, prior to that time, and generally, I think the public has had either a null or somewhat negative image of psychology. I don't think the general public knows the difference between psychiatry and psychology. It has been apparent to me that the media is often unaware of the sub-disciplines within psychology. There is some awareness that psychologists do research and some psychologists do engage in clinical practice, but how the two are related is still often vague. It is rare that the research foundation of practice is apparent to the public. Indeed, it is likely the average person does not know the difference between psychiatrists and clinical psychologists. As a psychologist who has always been concerned with making psychology relevant to the goals of society, it is clear that the media plays a critical role at the interface between what we know, what we do, what we want the public to know, and how to utilize our knowledge and our expertise to help society. So far, this has not really happened in a very productive way. Psychologists and the media could and should have a greater synergy than they currently do.

Interviewer: How does the image of psychology compare with the image of other sciences or related mental health disciplines?

PGZ: I think the public better understands media stories from other sciences such as biology and from medical research, the reason being that newspaper science writers who write about medicine and biology are usually much better trained than the science writers who write about other areas. There are workshops that train journalists in these areas, and those journalists often have had biology or premed courses in college. They want to get the story right. One of the problems with many stories about psychological research is that most reporters don't have a psychology background and they don't get the story right. For example, they don't appreciate what a control group is all about or they will emphasize only one part of a research investigation without understanding its broader context. My feeling is that biology and medicine are better understood and appreciated by the general public than is psychology. I think the media does not clearly differentiate psychology from psychiatry either in terms of practice or in terms of research, or for that matter, from other social sciences. One clear exception can be seen in the articles written by Erika Goode, the *New York Times* behavioral sciences columnist, who studied for an advanced degree in social psychology at University of California, Santa Cruz. She interviews enough of the right people, does her homework, gets dissenting views as well as supporters of the issue being presented, and crafts it all in an accessible style.

Interviewer: How do you think psychologists' involvement in the media could be helpful to the public?

PGZ: Our field offers much of value that can improve everyday functioning and quality of life, with clear implications for preventive healthcare. Our field could have a dramatic influence on learning and training in the fields of education, law, and

business. The media are the gatekeepers between the public and us. It is our job to learn how to open those gates more fully.

In 1969, APA president George Miller startled the American Psychological Association by saying we should give psychology away to the public. It was a startling statement because until that time psychologists gave psychology away to each other. Most psychologists were totally unconcerned about the public. The whole notion of being “relevant” was akin to “selling out” to the proles. We were saying that we’re not pop psychologists, we are serious scientists, and we shun the media because it is part of the commercial establishment. Psychologists did research, and we wrote about it in our journals, and we talked to each other. George Miller was an experimental/theoretical psychologist, so coming from him, this statement was very profound. Unfortunately, not as much has been done since then as might be to actually make psychology relevant to the public concerns.

It is a growing trend among psychologists to say that we ought to be able to demonstrate that what we have done makes a difference in people’s lives. In more recent years, most funding agencies have asked that researchers indicate how their research could conceivably have societal applications. I think that at a deeper level there are more and more psychologists who believe that research – even basic research – could have meaningful application. Now I should say that one of the reasons psychologists have not been interested in giving psychology away is because many psychologists are very modest, saying: “We’re not sure we have anything worthwhile to give away.” Other psychologists go on record saying, “We don’t know *how* to give psychology away.” “We don’t know what of all of our psychology people would want.” And then the question becomes what is the process for any psychologist to give psychology away to the public? And for me, one idea, not addressed by George Miller, is a clearer understanding of how we as psychologists can discover how to share information with the public. The media is the secret to how we can give away what we do and know. The media decides which of the information they will pass onto the public, and in what form.

3. The Future of Psychology in the Media

Interviewer: What do you think are some of the most important messages that we should be giving away?

PGZ: There are many important messages. My primary APA presidential initiative was to help demonstrate whether and how psychological research has made a significant difference in people’s lives. I believe that the answer is of course, “Yes – it has in many ways.” My presidential initiative has started collecting the database, but we will continue doing so for a number of years. We are starting in the United States and it will hopefully be expanded to many other nations’ psychological societies. We have been conducting a survey asking APA members to nominate research that demonstrates a significant impact on individual learning, education, financial behavior, health status, organizational behavior, and more. We are literally

identifying hundreds of individual studies or programs of research that demonstrate how psychology has had an impact, and has been translated into public policy, or practice within schools, hospitals, clinics, and organizations. We are just now collecting that information and ideally, we will have a compendium of psychologists' most valuable impacts compiled within a year or two. We will post this list on the APA website to demonstrate that we have made a difference, and we will make this compendium available to the media, to legislatures, and to the general public. It seems to me that this is something that psychology should have done a long time ago to demonstrate that what we do makes a difference in people's lives. APS has also agreed to collaborate with APA in gathering similar data from its members, one of the first collaborative efforts between the two societies.

We are getting some excellent examples of the impact of psychology in making significant changes. For instance, in the area of safety, researchers in the field of perception have made a difference in airline safety by redesigning commercial airline cockpits to correct for a visual illusion that was causing accidents. Other researchers were instrumental in the decision to change the color of emergency vehicles from red to lime green because you can see lime green in dim light better than you can see red. This is basic psychophysics being applied. Another example pertains to social psychologists and psychologists working in the area of psychology and law. Here, researchers have demonstrated the conditions under which testimonies can be biased or eyewitness accounts are fallible. Psychologists such as Elizabeth Loftus, Gary Wells, and a number of others have had such a substantial impact on the criminal justice system that former Attorney General Janet Reno arranged to have psychologists work with her staff to develop guidelines on reliable and valid eyewitness testimony. This is an indication that basic research on eyewitness identification by social psychologists has had a direct impact on influencing our legal system.

Another example pertains to research on posttraumatic stress. Terry Keane at the Boston VA is one of the pioneering researchers who have identified, diagnosed, and developed various treatment programs for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder – initially with regard to Vietnam veterans before they realized that this was a general phenomenon. Anyone who's experienced extreme trauma – rape victim, victims of various kinds of natural disasters, victims of terrorist attacks on September 11th – have benefited from this work.

One of the potentially most valuable instances of psychological theory making a difference is the application of Al Bandura's social-cognitive theory of modeling. A Mexican TV producer has developed it in creative ways by weaving different kinds of social models into soap operas. These long-running programs are watched by millions of viewers daily and they see powerful examples of the need for family planning, for raising the status of women through education, for safe-sex practices in preventing AIDS, and other vital messages. An international communications agency has extended this approach to develop similar soaps for many other countries worldwide. A critical component of this project is systematic independent evaluation of its effectiveness with solid behavioral outcomes.

Interviewer: Your initiative sounds like an important step towards the giving away of psychology and should be very helpful in educating the public about psychology. Why do you think this has not happened earlier?

PGZ: One problem with the interface between psychology and the public is the ever-present disdain for “pop psychology” – that is, of promoting unscientific psychology for commercial gain. It is important to realize that psychology is unlike any other discipline. Our work in academic psychology spans an enormous range of topics, from the most intricate details of the functioning of the nervous system, witnessed by the current excitement being generated by cognitive neuroscience, all the way to understanding issues such as the cultural construction of the self, conflict and peace, health and spirituality. Psychologists are working at very micro levels of analysis up to the broadest macro level. There is no other academic discipline that has our breadth and range. Moreover, psychology also has an effective, evolving practice component, which is also unique among the behavioral sciences. In addition, we have a built in, intrinsic popular component because we have something to say about virtually every aspect of human nature, how to understand it, and even how to improve it. Because of our breadth of focus, and overlap with yoga, meditation, spiritual awareness, religion, and personal effectiveness, we are the core of the “self-help” industry. Some for the better of society, some for society’s schlock pile. One of the big dangers of psychology, especially among academics and scientists, is that some psychologists have over-popularized it and have pulled it out of the context in which psychology means anything specific to the general public. So we lose our uniqueness and sacrifice what is special, our research foundation, to self-proclaimed gurus peddling contemporary versions of snake oil to the public.

Interviewer: So, it sounds like there might be some ways that our interactions with the media could endanger our reputation or inhibit us from appropriately conveying the kind of work we do as psychologists. Could our involvement with the media also be helpful to the field . . . how do you think this would happen?

PGZ: My strong sentiment is that we need the media and that the media needs us. Psychology is one of the most interesting fields of intellectual inquiry. Psychologists are doing so much that is exciting and interesting to the general public. The media needs our stories and we need the media to convey them to the public. Without the media, the only outlets for people to learn about psychology are through college and high school courses, or by reading our journals. Magazines, newspapers, TV, radio, and now the Internet are really the major outlets to reach what I’m calling the “general public,” that is, the less well-educated public unlikely to read our primary sources of research. If you want to reach teenagers with a message about depression, suicide prevention, or bullying, where else do you go than a public service spot on MTV? We have to become more sophisticated in seeding our important information in media venues most likely to reach the audiences we want to influence.

When I visit congressional offices in Washington during my trips to APA central office, every single office is constantly tuned in to television news; members of congress all have the local newspapers and current magazines available. The point is that legislators have to be tuned into the media. Legislators are the people who vote for funds to support our research, our education, training, and determine how practice dollars will be spent. If our stories get out into the media – such as onto CNN, public television, NPR, and radio talk shows, the New York Times, USA Today – any place where legislators will read or hear about our work, it will help create a positive image of what psychologists do in the minds of those in positions of power. The power to help society work better, as well as the power to provide resources to help psychology function more effectively.

Interviewer: Any risks in working with the media?

PGZ: Let's talk about what the media means. At one level, the media is this huge conglomerate. The media is made up of money-making corporations – ever-larger concentrations of companies dominating multiple media outlets. The bottom line for all of these companies is a profit motive. The media has to present shows on television that will get good ratings, so they can charge more for advertising, which oils the media machine. That's the bottom line. It's the same thing with radio, newspapers, and magazines. If these outlets cover stories that attract more readers or viewers, then the media is going to want more of them. We, as psychologists, have stories to tell that the media will want to report on because people want to see, hear, or read about what other people do, and what they might do differently or better. The popularity of "reality TV" is based on the public's fascination with observing other people behaving in a variety of settings. As an aside, however, there is little reality in these shows because they are so obviously staged, but more importantly, what they lack is some type of psychological analysis of what the behavior means.

Another important aspect of the media is that the decision of what gets accepted, how it gets accepted, and how it gets presented often rests on a single person (e.g., the editor, the production supervisor, or even a higher up). That one person may have a point of view or a particular bias that can affect the story they want to tell, and how they tell it, or reject it. This is one of the dangers of the media. Sometimes a given media source has a prearranged story that they want to get across. They are looking for psychologists that will give them either their expert opinion (without data necessarily) or some supporting data to promote their point of view. This is where psychologists often get trapped – we get misrepresented, misquoted, or quoted out of context because reporters may not be really listening to our whole stories. In some cases, they don't want the whole story; they just want information that will support a particular perspective that they already have in mind. I got trapped once in such a mess, a story I will share with you later on in this interview.

4. Getting Involved

Interviewer: How can psychologists get more involved in working with the media?

PGZ: One important problem is that psychologists have very little training in how to deal with the media. Suppose you conduct a study and reveal very interesting findings with important applications. So, what do you do with that? You can write it up for publication, submit it, and it may take a year to two years before it is published – or revise and resubmit endlessly. Mostly other psychologists will read the research. Now if the research is really “hot,” that is, the research is touching on some issue of national or regional significance, then you want to make sure that the public is informed about your findings ASAP. What do you do?

One thing you can do is to issue a press release. Not many psychologists know how to write a press release. Some major universities have news services that will do it for you or help you write one. APA also writes press releases each week on articles that it thinks could be of media interest, but again, people don’t have to wait for APA. Certainly any researcher should be doing this kind of self-promotion if they really believe the research is important. You can work with the news service of a university, if you have one, or if not, you ought to learn how to write one – one page leading with the significance and then highlighting the kind of research foundation for the finding you are promoting.

The second thing you can do – we all should be doing more of – is to write op/ed pieces. An op/ed piece in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Chicago Times*, *LA Times*, or *Herald Tribune* reaches millions of people instantly. You can have more impact with 500 words in one of these media outlets than you can by writing several books. The Science Directorate of the American Psychological Association has a website (www.apa.org/science/editorial.html) with some examples of good op/ed pieces. Early career psychologists can begin by writing op/ed pieces for the local, city, or regional newspaper, or even for a school newspaper if you’re an academic.

You can also write a book. A book has the potential to reach many people in the public. Trade paperbacks are like monographs on a single topic, written for the public in an engaging, accessible style. But, if your publisher or you privately arrange a publicity tour for your book, then it has the potential to reach a much wider audience. There are author’s agents who can arrange such tours for a fee. For textbooks, publishers hire sales representatives for promotion. But for trade books, you are the sales representative. It is expected that the author will do an author’s tour of self-promotion, if the book is judged to be a potential big seller and the author is personable – marketable. Depending on estimates on how well the book will sell, the publisher will organize a tour for you, or will help to support a tour. You might have to hire your own press agent and spend at least a couple of weeks on the road with the media promoting your book. If you are an academic, this is a huge burden, because it is time away from research and teaching. Whereas if you consider

yourself primarily as a writer, it is delightful because it is two weeks traveling around the country meeting people, friends, making fans. An ideal author tour might include 7–10 cities, including appearances on television networks or guest spots on AM radio. You might appear on some evening program or a call-in radio and/or television program. Several newspapers and/or magazines might interview you. In some cases, you go to a city, do two or three interviews, go to a new city and be in the Green room by 6 am the next morning. Your comments on a radio call-in will be very different than when making a brief presentation on a morning news show. You cannot have any notes; it must all be well rehearsed. In contrast, newspaper interviews can last an hour or two and be very detailed. But you must keep in mind that you are selling a product, your book, the topic, and you.

Book writing and book promotional tours are not activities we usually think about as psychologists. But recently, psychologists doing interesting basic research are now repackaging their work as trade books. This is important for summarizing a body of research in a domain that the public and the media will think is interesting. It can also be a lucrative activity. One of the best ways to earn money as a psychologist these days is to be an author or co-author of a trade book or textbook.

One way to get access to publishers for a possible future as a co-author of a text is to volunteer to do text chapter reviewing for the publisher in your domain, and then write brilliant reviews that will catch their attention. That is how I got chosen to replace Floyd Ruch, author of the best-selling *Psychology and Life* introductory psych text, only they asked me to do the review in hopes I might adopt the edition for my course.

Lastly, you can work directly with television. For this approach, it is important that you utilize different kinds of media in your research that can be used on television. Let's say you do an experiment and you have some interesting results. If you called your local TV station to tell them about your research, the very first thing they are going to ask you is if you have any videotape. If you are doing research on topics that might have popular appeal and might lead to media interest, then you must videotape the sessions. Of course, you need to obtain the appropriate consent and human subjects' approval to do this. As psychologists, we're trained to focus primarily on results, so when you go to a convention and do a talk we often rush through the procedure and simply describe the findings. The media is interested in the procedure, however, and it is important for them to show this to the public on videotape. Process is as important as results for visual media.

This is one of the most important things I have learned about interacting with the media. Two examples: Stanley Milgram's research and the Stanford Prison Experiment. The reason those two studies have had enduring value is because they are on video. Milgram was way ahead of his time in the 60s by filming part of his research, and that film is still being shown now – 30 years later. Incidentally, I believe that the flak he got about the ethics of his blind obedience research was due largely to seeing the participants showing so much stress in deciding whether to continue to step up the shock levels. That does not come across in the same dramatic way from just reading his article or book. I did something similar with the Stanford Prison

study. We videotaped our procedure both as part of our data collection and for future teaching purposes. But because we had this archival material available in a day-by-day chronology of events, the research became more accessible to the media. Thirty years later (the Stanford Prison Experiment was conducted in 1971), NBC will show (in 2002) an hour-long documentary on the Stanford Prison Experiment, partly because we have so much video material available to share with them.

Indeed, the Stanford Prison study, in a way, was a forerunner of Reality TV. I have two strong feelings about Reality TV. On the one hand, it's wonderful because it demonstrates that the general public is fascinated with observing human behavior – and that's what we get paid for – that's what psychology is all about. Observing human behavior, trying to make sense of it, trying to explain it, trying to influence it in a positive direction, trying to predict it. Reality TV is popular because it's fascinating for people to simply observe other people in various settings, as I mentioned earlier. On the other hand, Reality TV does not offer any explanation of the behavior – it is raw behavior undigested. What I would want to add is a psychological component. Psychologists have the understanding of non-verbal behavior, of interpersonal dynamics to explain the significance of people's behavior to the public. Second, because of the media ratings, Reality TV has become more and more corrupted – it is hardly reality. It's all staged, and highly edited and hyped to be more appealing to audiences. The enduring popularity of the Milgram study and of the Stanford Prison study was simply having available a film document of what the experience was like from the perspective of the subject. In essence, that is really what Reality TV is all about. That was the gift of Candid Camera, and the genius of Allen Funt, an intuitive social psychologist.

The best of reality television in my biased opinion was a program called "The Human Zoo." It was produced in 2000, in London by Granada Media, London Weekend Television (in conjunction with Discovery Channel). It was a study of the fundamental psychological principles involved when a dozen strangers meet for the first time in a lodge in the Lake District of England – a remote area where they lived together for a week. It includes essentially the most basic ordinary psychological and social psychological processes. For instance, people making a first acquaintance, people getting to know one another, people forming impressions of others, making their own impressions on others, forming dyads, forming friendships, organizing into groups, groups dominating one another, etc. What differentiates this from other reality television programs is that a British psychologist and I are commenting from time to time on the process while it is happening. We are making predictions about who will be friends and who will be enemies based on the same evidence the audience has of verbal and non-verbal behavior. And then you can see whether or not we are correct. Throughout the program, there are cutaways from the psychological phenomenon exhibited by the 12 participants to mini experiments and demonstrations that illustrate comparable concepts from a psychological perspective. For instance, we see people making first impressions as they initially meet one another, and then there is a cutaway to a demonstration of research on job interviewers' formations of first impressions within the first 15 seconds of a meeting. Unfortunately, the Discovery Channel decided to show only two of the three programs. The last program did not air, and the station is not distributing videos. That is

part of my frustration with the media; in this case, some stupid executive making the decision that American audiences won't appreciate programs with people who have British accents. Do they not know about the popular British shows on PBS?

Interviewer: What would you say to graduate students or early career psychologists who may be interested in working with the media?

PGZ: Psychologists should always be aware of their reputation within their department and their reputation within the field. And departments vary considerably in terms of their acceptability quotient for media portrayals of research. There are some departments that do not like to see young professors quoted in the media, or promoted in the media; in other departments, it's just the opposite. Certainly universities benefit when, for instance, it is reported that findings come from "a study done by a Yale researcher." This instantly gives Yale credit for important work, and the alumni love to see this. But, there is always tension between colleagues who may be envious of you for the media attention. Also, some colleagues may feel somehow that working with the media is commercializing or popularizing psychology inappropriately. After all, psychology should be a basic scientific enterprise – you do not often see theoretical physicists hocking their wares. Many people believe that media coverage cheapens the research, and if senior colleagues hold this position strongly, then working with the media could be held against you. Indeed, one way I have dealt with this tension was to be sure I always had a sound scientific study to balance against my more popular work, to keep my science colleagues happy, and accepting of me.

On the other hand, in terms of promotion of the field, I have always believed from the time I was a little assistant professor without tenure, that media involvement is crucial to help create a positive image of the field to people outside of psychology. If you have something important to say – if you've done something that's meaningful and you want people to know about it – then your colleagues and certainly your administration should be pleased to have you reach out beyond the confines of the traditional academic distribution channels. (If not, send me their names and cousin Gino will pay a friendly visit to them.)

But again, the danger is that no one controls the media. You can't control what the media will say or what the media will do. You can't control it even by giving the media your documentary video – they may elect only to show a minute or two of the video, and perhaps not the most important or cogent part from your perspective. Psychologists are often frustrated because we are used to exercising control over our product – our product is usually an article we're writing, or a book project that allows us to negotiate with the editor before making changes. With the media, once they have the material, they control it – they can change it virtually any way they want. Also if it falls under the heading of "news," then there is no editorial control at all for authors of research.

Interviewer: Given these risks and the loss of control, what advice would you have for early career psychologists who are contacted about their work?

PGZ: Well, you don't want to passively sit and wait for somebody to ask you. There are many sources that can help early career psychologists promote their work. Publishing in *Scientific American* or *Psychology Today* are sources that will help you reach millions with your research. The APA Monitor is another great source. If you have a study that you think is newsworthy and is of interest to psychologists broadly or the public, contact the Monitor staff, and if you can convince them of its value, they may have a staff research reporter do a story on it.

The media may contact an early career psychologist directly, but typically this is because a colleague has mentioned your name. Networking in psychology is very important – early career psychologists should try to know people in different areas of the field. Go to conventions, present posters, give talks, make yourself visible, give constructive feedback to colleagues, give compliments when appropriate, schmooze with your colleagues. But know your limits. You may be contacted for a story that falls outside your area of expertise. Suppose you are contacted by a local reporter to comment on a story pertaining to child molesters or adultery that happens to be in the news at that time. If you are not an expert, indicate that immediately and if possible refer the reporter to colleagues who are. This is important, even if you are asked only for a quote – a single sentence, refuse if you are not comfortable being quoted as The Expert. That is where your colleagues will bristle. Reporters are not really interested in you as an Individual; rather it is you as part of a larger category of relevance to their readers. They will attach your quote to the reputation of your university – for instance, they want to be able to say, “A Stanford professor says . . .” or a “Psychological researcher believes”

Overall, if the media contacts you, it is really important to think about the experience as a negotiation. Most young psychologists are extremely flattered that someone from the local newspaper, radio, or TV station thinks that what they have to say is important. But you must establish guidelines: What is it exactly that they want from you? What is the theme of the piece? What are they searching for? What's the conclusion? How much time or space do you have? Do they just want a quote? You don't want to talk for an hour when, in fact, they just want a sentence or simple conclusion statement. It's the same thing if you appear on a television program. It's critical to ask how many minutes you will be allotted. It is common for psychologists to plan on communicating several important points, but because they were unaware of the length of the edited interview, they talk too long about only the first point and the others never make the final cut. So you start out by saying, “There are three important features of Z: A, B, and C. A is special because” That way, it is clear you have a proper overview of what is important, but have had time only to develop point A. Also, be sure to ask about others that have been consulted on this topic, and always suggest other experts, even after you've spoken.

Interviewer: How did you first get involved with working with the media?

PGZ: My very first experience with the media was when I was a graduate student at Yale University. I did a study in 1957 on the effects of caffeine and chlorpromazine on the sexual behavior of the male white rat. I did it with Herbert Barry, a fellow graduate student and we published it in *Science*. I was the senior author and it was a hot topic. Chlorpromazine had just become available, so this was one of the very first studies on this drug that revolutionized treatment of schizophrenia. What we found simply was that chlorpromazine depressed sexual behavior, and caffeine accentuated and enhanced the sexual behavior of the male white rat. Well, we published it and people were mildly interested.

The next week there was an article in Joyce Brothers' column, which said something like "ladies, if you want to revive your spouse's bedroom vigor, give him an extra cup of coffee." Our research was dealing with the male white rat and high doses of pure caffeine, and she's making this extension completely out of context. It was actually humorous. Dr. Brothers also reported it on the popular Tonight Show, and I was inundated with reprint requests. It highlights the point that the media are looking for a story. Remember, every day the media has to fill thousands of pages of newspapers and magazines, and thousands of hours of airtime on radio and television channels. The media is desperate for stories, and we have stories to tell. That was my first experience learning about the media's interest in stories from psychological research, albeit from a somewhat distorted perspective.

I also got involved in news media from other research I had done as a graduate student at Yale, and published in the first volume of *Psychology Today*. It was an analysis of the psychological tactics used by the police in extracting confessions from suspects – sometimes powerful enough to induce false confessions. I was invited to defend the research at a national law enforcement conference, and it got picked up and distributed by the *New York Times*. I guess I have tended to work on topics that have broader appeal than some of our more typical psychology subjects, like shyness, evil, cults, violence, and madness.

A bizarre incident occurred when I first arrived at Stanford University. I received a call from a *New York Times* reporter, John Leo (who has since become quite famous), on a deadline for a story on women using profanity. I explained that I did not know anything about this topic. Remember, you should make it clear when you are not an expert. But also remember, that they will never give up if they have to meet a deadline. So, this reporter said that he had a tight deadline the next day, and he needed just one quote. I asked about why he was interested in this story, and he said that his editor was cursed out at a cocktail party and he wanted to know whether it is a general phenomenon that women are using more profanity, or whether it was just this woman personally cursing him out. And I said, "Well I can't help you." He asked, "Are there any psychologists who are studying this?" "Well as far as I know there are no psychologists studying profanity in women," I told him, "there are a lot of areas that psychologists just never study, that they're not interested in." He asked, "Can you think of anything in your experience where you've noticed women using

profanity?” “Now that you mention it, yes.” Mistake – he sucked me in to the black hole I should not have entered. I told him, “When I was taking an abnormal psychology graduate student course that met at Middletown State Hospital, we visited the back schizophrenic wards. Women patients were typically more expressive than male patients. That is, they often exhibited themselves, cursed, and did other dramatic things, more so than did males.” This was 1956, before antipsychotic medication, and patients’ psychoses were much more florid. Now obviously these are not controlled observations, I likely noticed women being more overtly expressive because of the greater deviation for the usual baseline of women not being so publicly demonstrative. Regardless, the reporter thanked me and said a cordial goodbye.

Hold the presses. Next day, the *New York Times* felt it was fit to report a new trend sweeping America. A front page article exclaimed, something like, “Women are using more obscenities from swanky cocktail party matrons to mental patients on hospital wards – according to psychological researchers” – only ME! The story was distorted to indicate that I had observed *over many years* that female mental patients were very obscene. Notice the changes in timing and lifting of my restricted observations and the special population that I had casually noticed. The story was picked up by news services and spread literally around the globe. I became a very embarrassed world’s leading expert on female obscenity, but did turn down talk show offers.

What you may find interesting is that I actually used this anecdote in *Psychology and Life*, the textbook I wrote in 1971, as an instance of how research gets distorted and how an instant authority is created and should not be believed just because the *New York Times* says so. Sometimes all the news is not fit to print, even in the *New York Times*.

Interviewer: How did you get involved with the *Discovering Psychology Series*, *Candid Camera*, and now *NBC News*?

PGZ: A PBS station in Boston, WGBH-TV, was interested in doing a series on psychology. Some people at the station had taken a few psychology courses, and realized that despite the limited public perception at the time, psychology was about more than the brain and Freud. And so they approached the Annenberg CPB foundation with a proposal to fund a PBS series on psychology. Annenberg officials agreed, stipulating that the series should be geared towards remote learning/adult education. They did a search for a host, who would also be the chief scientific advisor. They wanted someone who had written a textbook, who was doing current research, and had a good media presence. A number of psychologists were “screen tested.” I gave some lectures at Swarthmore, attended by WGBH staff, and won the job, undoubtedly on charm points.

I essentially created the series. Originally, it was going to be 13 one-hour programs, and I decided that it would be better to have 26 half-hour programs. I wanted to make sure that we would have something that would be good for PBS

viewers, something that would be good for adults and Telecourse learners via videotape, but then also something good for high school and college students to have as an in-class resource. So as not to dominate the 50-minute class hour, I decided the half-hour format would serve best. Essentially I laid out what would be a good introductory psychology course, with one program on each of the major topics in psychology. Then I was in the position of selecting the psychologists who would be interviewed, and I shaped each program. In the process, I essentially trained the entire WGBH production staff in basic psychology. For each program I wrote 25–50 pages of background on the topic, including the basic principles, the historical background of each topic, who were the key research contributors, who were the current people who I thought would be the most interesting on camera. Then I would block out the program, deciding on the format and sequence for each episode. I was aided enormously by a team of 10 advisors that I selected to represent a broad range of psychology and education. We started filming in 1989 and finished in 1990–1991, and the series has been a huge success. It has aired continuously since 1990. The series has been shown in most colleges, virtually all high schools, and 10 different countries worldwide. They have sold thousands of videos; it is one of the most popular series in the Annenberg program. I have just revised the series in 2001. We have three all-new programs – cultural psychology and cognitive neuroscience – that did not exist a decade ago, and applied psychology. For 17 of the original episodes, we have filmed new interviews or revised old material. That project has been my most enduring, and probably most positive impact via the media, because I had a lot of control of the procedure, process, and outcome. I was the chief scientific advisor, as well as co-writer and creator of each series. As the host, I was able to really influence the way that many people teach introductory psychology. Unfortunately, the series never made it to prime time or the basic PBS station. Because it was only a half hour, it was always on the second PBS station, which is really the community college station. It is not reaching the general public as much as it should because it's really a very good series. I should say in passing that I don't receive any royalties or residuals for the *Discovering Psychology* series. I did it only for my love of psychology and teaching. The new program on cognitive neuroscience just won an Emmy for instructional television, as external justification for my efforts.

Candid Camera, in a sense, was kind of the prototype for Reality TV. The show looked at ordinary people in either natural or contrived situations. Years ago, I wrote to Allen Funt saying I would love to have access to his material in order to create videos for teachers and students of psychology. I wanted to prepare a video for introductory psychology and one for social psychology courses. I worked hard to convince him to work together with me on that project. He initially refused, but I was not deterred. As President of WPA in 1983, I invited him to give a keynote address in San Francisco, which he did brilliantly. Then, I invited him back later on for me to do a “pull piece” interview with him for *Psychology Today* magazine. I wine-dined him, and we became friends. The key, however, was convincing Funt that he was more than an entertainer, he was an educator – that viewers could learn while

they laughed. He finally succumbed to this persuasive pressure allowing me to work with him reviewing hundreds of candid camera episodes. We identified 16 programs that I felt were most interesting for introductory psychology teachers and 16 other programs that were interesting for social psychology teachers. McGraw Hill publishers distributes the videos and laser discs, and I wrote a study guide with Allen Funt to accompany the videos. (I do not receive any royalties from the Candid Camera series or study guides either; more doing it for the love of psychology and teaching.)

Another opportunity to work with the media came from the Stanford Prison study. That has been a big media event; the research itself is a dramatic piece. It is really like a Greek drama – what happens when you put good people in an evil place? There is a stage-like setting, costumes, actors, auxiliary actors (i.e., the police, the parents, a public defender, a Catholic priest). There is deep dramatic focus in the story. Do good people win over evil situations or do evil situations corrupt good people?

I am always thinking about how to communicate research findings in my teaching, so during the study, I took video, audio, and slides as the experiment progressed. Afterwards, I prepared a tape narration synchronized with the presentation of 80 slides that I distributed at cost for many years to teachers and community groups. Now that presentation is available on a free website now (www.prisonxp.org) along with some video clips from our documentary video. This fine website, created with the assistance of Scott Plous, has had more than 6 million unique page viewers over the last two years. This is astounding to me that my little study should reach so many people so many years after its debut.

Then, working with undergraduates at Stanford, primarily Ken Musen (now a film maker), I created a video of the Stanford Prison study using the original black and white archival footage. We updated this with interviews of some prisoners and guards in 1989. It is titled: “Quiet Rage: The Stanford Prison Experiment.” This version has been distributed to colleges, high schools, and criminal justice groups. That video has been influential in a number of ways to help others get a sense of what the experience was like. We distribute it from my office at Stanford, with ordering information in the website.

Recently, a German film company produced a film called *Das Experiment*, which was based on the Stanford Prison study. It was produced with an outstanding cast and one of the leading directors of Germany. Unfortunately, it is a terrible movie for the image of psychology, and I have debated publicly the screenwriter and lead actor and done interviews deploring it. The first part of the movie documents the procedure used in my research, but then the second part is a fantasy sequence with extreme violence and graphic sex scenes that, of course, had nothing to do with the original experiment. Guards kill prisoners and rape the female psychologist-researcher, and prisoners kill guards! Sadly, the movie ends in a shambles with no debriefing, no explanation of why the study was conducted, and no sense of which part of the movie was real and which part was fiction. All the promotion of the film features references to my

study, our website, and to the research publications with Craig Haney and Curt Banks – but then they say it is a fantasy exercise. It is a sad example of the worse kind of exploitation of psychological research for purely commercial purposes. Recent research in Germany shows that viewer attitudes toward psychology are more negative after watching this awful film. And that is very distressing to me.

Lastly, on the prison study, the BBC recently did a recreation of the study with volunteers for a week and shown on prime time over 4 hours. I refused to be a paid consultant on the program because it was now clear the study was unethical and because I felt it would suffer from the Heisenberg effect. A made for prime time TV experiment would alter the behavior being studied by the very act of obviously recording it to get good sound and video close-ups. The participants would be aware at most times of being under surveillance and would want to look good for the home audience when it was all over. And that is indeed what happened. The prisoners wore lapel mikes at all times and often held them while talking to each other. Then there were “confessional” breaks when guards, prisoners and the two British experimenters each spoke at various times to the camera. The essence of my study was creating an intense cauldron of behavioral dynamics that soon lost the sense of being an experiment and became a prison run by psychologists. The BBC experiment was always an “experiment,” and always a TV show to the participants, and so lost the essential intensity created in the Stanford Prison Experiment. Interestingly, in that recreation, the prisoners won over the guards – with hardly any external validity to prisons of which I am aware.

Currently, I am the psychological consultant for NBC News. NBC has asked me to help them develop programming ideas that have psychological content, psychological relevance. As I said earlier, one of the programs is going to be an hour-long documentary of the Stanford Prison study in the fall. We are trying to generate other kinds of ideas for how to get good psychology into NBC programming, into the Today Show, to NBC News. Also NBC Dateline creates programs for other networks, like the Discovery Channel. We just did a pilot show for Discovery, called “Only Human,” that sadly they did not buy for a season series. In large part they rejected further shows because the host-comedian, whom they chose, got terrible ratings. The concept is a good one, that I hope to push further, a series of interesting or funny skits each based on a psychological theme, like compliance, conformity, the burden of keeping secrets, invasion of other’s personal space – but with some psychological analyses after each one, by me or relevant experts. If done right, it can’t miss.

Interviewer: You have certainly been our field’s leader in helping to educate the public about psychology. Was this initially one of your career goals?

PGZ: When I think back now, my primary experience with the media has really come about mostly through my teaching, but also through my research. In my teaching, I’ve always used videos, film, audiotapes, newspaper or magazine articles –

anything to help me breach the barrier between the classroom and everyday life. The media has always been an integral part of my teaching. As I mentioned earlier, my research tends either toward the dramatic or the appealing mundane – as with my research on shyness in adults and children. But mainly, the media has always been part of what I teach. In my first edition of *Psychology in Life*, I included a section on how to be a wise consumer of research. Essentially, this is for the average student who is not going to be a psychologist – 95 percent of students who take introductory psychology are not going on to even major in psychology. However, they will be consumers of our research, as physicians, lawyers, business people, and legislators, so we want them to know what psychology has to offer. My work educating the public about psychology has been an extension of my commitment to teaching.

Aside from the content of psychology we have another unique message – our experimental research message – our focus on controlled observation, systematic variation, and our sensitivity to human bias. No other discipline has this to the same extent. This makes psychology able to talk to the general public about matters of value to them, and to teach them about dangers in misleading advertising allegedly based on “research shows that” Thus, we have an important contribution to make – and young psychologists should be taking over from us old farts and leading the way to promoting psychology, to giving it away to the public in the right ways.

In conclusion, I have enjoyed sharing these random reflections of my career as a media maven, or media buff, and hope the basic message gets through to the next generation of psychologists.

As a fitting ending of this interview, I was just notified today that I would receive a special award from the Council of Scientific Society Presidents for my media and textbook work. It is the Carl Sagan Award for Improving the Public Understanding and Appreciation of Science. It puts me in a rather select group of previous winners, among them: Carl Sagan, E. O. Wilson, National Geographic, NOVA-TV, Scientific American, and the NYT-Science Times. Wow! Now I will have to redouble my future efforts to live up to such an honor, and hope to be able to do so. Thanks for your attention.

Ciao.