

Speculating on the News

The phrase, “May you live in interesting times,” often thought of as an ancient Chinese curse and referenced by sources as diverse as Robert F. Kennedy, Carl Jung and science fiction writer Eric Frank Russell, is being quoted a lot these days. And no one can dispute that these times are both interesting and very challenging. It’s easy to feel overwhelmed. We’re being deluged with information from diverse sources that are constantly reconfiguring. We have CNN with the “magic wall” that zooms in and out between local areas and the national and world view. Our newspapers are struggling to maintain a foothold in a rapidly changing media landscape. And blogs, aggregators and social media are redefining how we think about news on a daily basis. Lines are being blurred and redrawn – CNN’s launching a wire service, Newsweek has closed many regional bureaus, city newspapers are merging or are closing altogether, and it seems that almost everyone has something to tweet about, blog about, podcast about, or post on the walls in Facebook.

So, where are we headed and how can you get news out when you have it? Well, I think it’s going to “take a village,” to paraphrase the new Secretary of State. The Obama administration has it right when it comes to communication – the channels have to be varied, the message specific, and the outreach broad and frequent. At the same time, we have to recognize that the media itself is being barraged by every person who believes he has a promotable idea and a mechanism to convey it. So, the message also has to be relevant, compelling and timely as one of my co-workers is constantly reminding staff here – and that hasn’t changed.

In presenting a story, it’s important to recognize that your new book, your award nomination, or your appearance at an important event is important to you, to your publisher and, hopefully, to the audience you’re trying to reach. It is not inherently important to the media at large, particularly when their current focus is on survival, growth and figuring out how to attract ad revenue.

So, you should do your homework before pitching the media. Consider which media would be most likely to be responsive and do targeted outreach to those outlets. Then think about what can make your story relevant to a broader range of media – consider how it may tie in with what’s currently in the news, whether you have something unique to offer, and what could make you a good source for them. You want to give them a good reason to keep your information on hand for future stories or review space. Use your website and your blog, if you have one, to showcase your particular areas of expertise, and update them regularly with information on your books and your activities. Stay abreast of your topic by using Google Alerts and consider following important media contacts that way too, so you’ll know what they may respond to.

Be visual when you can in presenting messages, and be succinct. According to Alan Mutter, who writes Newsosaur.blogspot.com, “[there] is the need to use fewer words, provide more graphics, cultivate the social aspects of the web and leverage mobile technology more assiduously than we do today.” It’s better to reach out more often with briefer messages, as long as you do it when you have something new to convey. Do your best to customize your message, even if it’s the same for a group of media contacts; that way you’ll have less chance of having your message blocked as spam or stopped before it reaches the person you’ve targeted. Talk

with your publisher and publicist, if you have one, about who you'd like to contact. That will provide the opportunity to discuss which outreach may be best coming from them, and where you can be most effective.

Keep in mind that people often want immediate gratification, so be mindful of your book's publication and availability dates. You want the bulk of the coverage to happen when your book is available – otherwise you take the chance that customers will opt for another book in its stead, which is easy to do with sites like Amazon where similar books are promoted on the same page.5:6/09