Things to Consider Regarding Media Requests From Hostile Outlets

If you are invited to participate in one-on-one or panel sessions on Fox News or right-wing radio outlets there are important issues to consider. Given this swarm of media attention following a tragedy and the likelihood that these news stations will continue to press for interviews, we thought to share some immediate tips:

- When invited by a producer to participate on a show, quickly research the program before committing to appear. Consider what you may have to lose or to gain by taking the interview in the first place. In many cases, these programs have previously devoted hours of prior “news” coverage to blatantly prejudicial and bigoted commentary. Their audience tunes in to hear this and to have their own prejudices reinforced. These are commercial outlets and they focus on their target audience. In essence, you will be playing on bigotry’s home field.

- Most often, we work with groups focused on influencing those who have not yet decided how they feel about refugee policy or anti-Muslim discrimination - the largest majority of Americans. These “moveable” audiences are very unlikely to be found on right-wing radio or TV or only to exist in smaller numbers.

- Some right wing shows are more antagonistic than others and not all Fox programs are alike. Shepard Smith’s news show on Fox is, in relative terms, more thoughtful. Megyn Kelly has a long history of Islamophobic programs, but sometimes she doesn’t play to type. Sean Hannity goes straight to bigotry and attack, typically with the aim of criticizing the perceived shortcomings of the Obama administration. Review some footage of previous shows on this topic to determine how the host typically conducts interviews and what kinds of questions you can typically expect.

- Fox News shows and some right wing media shows are very comfortable with “new voices” because individuals with less media experience are often easily forced off-balance once on the air. If you do not have significant media experience, or time for a substantial amount of professional preparation, we strongly suggest declining interviews with these types of shows.

- An interview with a Fox News show or a right-wing radio talk show notorious for combative language will be a stressful and potentially unsettling experience. You must be ready for someone to accuse you of culpability for murder on live TV and respond in a clear, strong, accessible way with an understanding that the audience may be too hostile to listen to your main points.

- If you do decide that the benefits of joining a show outweigh the risks and costs, you should develop 2-3 main points and practice delivering them in the face of hostile interrogation. Block off a significant period of time ahead of the interview for practice. ReThink Media can provide you with professional preparation or we can work with you and a trusted member of your staff or a colleague to set up a very rigorous practice. Be sure to ask the producer if this will be a one-on-one interview or if you will need to hold your own against a larger panel.
• Some examples of the types of questions you should expect (depending upon the show and the type of questions you can expect) may include:
  - “Only Islam promotes this kind of violent radicalism but Muslims haven’t done much of anything to deal with that. What’s it going to take?”
  - “Obama is so afraid of offending anyone that he won’t even say ‘radical Islam’. What about you? Are you ready to admit that Muslims have a serious problem and that radical Islam is a serious threat? How many more people have to be murdered before you’ll get real?”
  - “America has a serious problem with extremist Muslims, but there seems to be no way to ID which individuals pose the greatest risk. Doesn’t that mean we need to take a broad approach to monitoring Muslims?”
  - Some polls finds that “Nearly one-fifth of Muslim respondents said that the use of violence in the United States is justified in order to make Shariah the law of the land in this country.” That’s outrageous. One fifth of Muslims already in America favoring violence against the country. With that level of support, only the politically correct can claim that the Muslim community isn’t a big part of the problem. What do you say to that?” (NOTE: This references a thoroughly unsound poll commissioned by a professional Islamophobe, but these types of polling-based attacks are common).
  - “You claim that ISIS doesn’t represent Islam, but how many Christians have joined ISIS? They’re recruiting Muslims – no one else. Clearly this is a problem with Islam, isn’t it? Why is the Muslim community so opposed to doing anything about it?”

• Prepare sample intro language where you an deliver your opening concisely and make a strong empathetic connection with your audience.
• Practice “pivot” language that you can use to delivering your main points (i.e. “The important thing for Americans to remember, Sean, is...” and “The more important question here is...”). Expect the host to antagonize you or interrupt you to redirect the line of questioning. Your job is not to answer every question. Your job is to use every question as a means to deliver your top points. That requires practice.
• Speak with strength and confidence, but do not lose your cool. Ensure your talking points are clear and that you are able to state them in 10-20 seconds. Lean forward in your chair during the interview, look forward, and physically convey the conviction of your statements.
• Do not directly attack the host, but words to the effect of “people who turn this into an attack on Islam, rather than recognizing it as the actions of deranged individuals, are just making themselves pawns in ISIS’ overall strategy” would be compelling for that audience.

Additional resource from our colleagues at Media Matters:
Meet The Extremists Who Lead Fox’s Conversation About Islam