

Can writing letters to newspapers and magazines further your academic career?*

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Since my time as an undergraduate psychology student, I have had countless letters published in national daily papers (*Times, Guardian, Independent, Telegraph, Daily Mail*) and Sunday broadsheets (*Sunday Times, Independent on Sunday, Observer*). In addition to this, I also regularly pen letters to a whole range of other outlets including international journals (e.g., *Nature, British Medical Journal*), professional journals (e.g., *The Psychologist, Nursing Times*), specialist journals (e.g., *Psychology Teaching Review*), newsletters (e.g., *The Psychology Teacher*), local papers (e.g., *Nottingham Evening Post*), magazines (e.g., *Bizarre, Arcade*) and specialist papers (e.g., *Times Higher Education Supplement*).

The subjects I usually write on concern my research specialisms (addictions, gambling, videogames, cyberpets, fame), my academic discipline (psychology), and/or aspects of higher education (RAE, external examining, assessment procedures). In short, they are all areas that I know something about either personally or professionally.

Many people ask me why I do it. As a writer, I would be lying if I said I didn't like seeing my name in print. However, this is not the primary reason for writing letters. When I first started writing to the press it was usually just to make what I felt were justified points and to add to, and/or stimulate debate. However, it soon became clear the letter writing had many other beneficial spin-offs. In this short article I will outline some of these advantages (and a small number of disadvantages) of engaging in what may seem like a potentially non-productive activity. The advantages include :

Potential for increased publicity - There is little doubt that a published letter has the potential to bring about further publicity. For instance, on April 19th 1995, I had a

letter published in *The Times* about the potential addictiveness of scratchcards describing them as “paper fruit machines”. Later that afternoon I got a call from *London Talk Radio* asking if I would appear on Frank Bough's breakfast show the next morning. On April 20th at 6.50am I did a live interview on the breakfast show. As a result of this interview - parts of which were repeated on the half-hour news bulletins - I was suddenly inundated with requests for interviews with other radio stations. What followed was the “snowball effect” in action and within a very short space of time I had done about 15 media interviews on scratchcards. This established myself as the "expert" in the area. The only problem was I had never written anything about scratchcards except for the letter! As a consequence, I researched the area more fully and published a paper on the subject in November 1995. The paper then went on to be quoted (almost verbatim) by the Labour MP Lynne Jones and appeared in *Hansard* - the proceedings of Parliament. As a result of this I put a successful grant bid together and am now actively engaged in the study of adolescent scratchcard gambling.

Dissemination of preliminary results – Letters can be a very quick way of disseminating preliminary results. I only ever do this if I think it will have a wider reaching effect than waiting for formal publication (e.g. some kind of political effect). However, when this happens it usually generated more publicity. For instance, I had a letter published in *The Guardian* briefly outlining the preliminary results of some of the research that Nottingham Trent University had found concerning adolescent gambling. This was picked up by a *Daily Mail* reporter who got the story onto the front page of the paper!

Commissioned articles – Occasionally, the publication of a letter will lead to the commissioning of a larger article in the same area. For instance, one letter that I wrote for *The Sunday Times* on legislative recommendations for gambling led to a commission to write an article in a similar vein for my local paper (*Nottingham Evening Post*). Exactly the same thing happened when I wrote a letter on Furbies. Regular letters on videogames also helped me gain a regular column in the magazine *Arcade*.

Invited letters - Constant letter writing sometimes pays dividends because the Letter Editor gets to know who you are and which subjects you know a lot about. I have now been invited three times to write lead letters for *The Sunday Times* (gambling legislation, videogame violence, and cybercrime).

New contacts – Many letters that I have written have led to new contacts that I never would have made without the letter being published. Some of these want more information (e.g., Broadcast Complaints Commission), some want to follow up for a possible programme (e.g., Panorama) while others want to form alliances and initiatives (e.g. National Internet Crime Forum). I’ve also discovered that some journalists and other bodies use letters as a way of getting your names onto their databases.

Establishing new ideas - Writing letters is a great way of raising issues and ideas without having to write a full-blown article. It provides an excellent forum for the establishing initial thoughts, novel observations or naming new phenomena. For instance, in my academic articles where I have expanded on the idea of scratchcards being “paper fruit machines”, I always refer to the original Times letter to establish its chronology of use.

Dissemination of advice - Letters can be a productive and wide-reaching way of imparting useful information to interested parties and/or user groups. For instance, I have written a number of letters with advice for parents about how to promote pro-responsible videogame playing in their children.

Participant recruitment for research - Although there are ethical questions to consider, letters to the media can help in the recruitment of participants. This can be

in the form of either general calls for help (for instance, I wrote to all local newspapers during the 1998 World Cup asking for football fanatics to take part in some research I was doing) or in terms of unsolicited responses. I have found the latter particularly useful in obtaining case studies for various behavioural addictions that I have been researching into (e.g. exercise addiction, gambling addiction, internet addiction etc.)

Defending reputation – If you are someone who is quoted in the media, writing letters to the press can sometimes be an occupational hazard! On a number of occasions, I have had to write in to a paper to correct a misattributed quote, clarify something that's been taken out of context and/or further defend a viewpoint that someone has attacked. On rare occasions, letters have to be written as a form of damage limitation. Thankfully I've only done that once since 1987!

Fame by association – One of the peripheral consequences of publishing letters is that your letter occasionally ends up in a batch of letters where the other contributors to the debate are prominent public figures. I often find my letters alongside those MPs. One of my letters was placed very prominently next to that of Richard Branson.

Writing letters – the downside

So far, I've painted a very rosy picture of writing letters to the press but there are a few downsides. By far the most aggravating aspect is receiving disturbing letters from a diverse section of the population. For instance I've had letters from :

1. infuriated parents (saying I'm talking rubbish about cyberpets),
2. letters from the mentally unstable (saying they had dreams that I could treat them),
3. letters from far right-wing groups (thinking that the charity I worked for – The National Council for Social Concern – had neo-Nazi sympathies)

4. letters from religious fundamentalists (I get a lot of these for no other reason than my work address is printed at the bottom of most letters!).

I also get countless letters from students asking for help with their work (from 15 year-old GCSE schoolchildren to PhD students). The demand is now so high I simply do not have the time to help all these individuals. The biggest number of student calls come from the increasing number of Broadcast journalism students all wanting “five to ten minutes” of your time for an interview. In an ideal world, I’d love to help them all – but I can’t!

Thankfully, the downsides of letter writing haven’t put me off because the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages. I hope that I have convinced you that letter writing can be a positive and rewarding experience.

* A much edited version of this article appeared in Griffiths, M.D. (2001). Why I believe letter writing can improve your career prospects. *Times Higher Education Supplement*, January 5, p.14.