GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR TALKING WITH THE MEDIA

In short:  
**Be Brief**  
**Be Careful**  
**Be Well Prepared**

Think in advance of questions the media might ask and how to formulate answers in ways that are least likely to be misused. For example, if you were asked a question about a perceived negative action on the part of an individual or organization, such as:

"Are you doing this because you disapprove of the destructive actions taken by (fill in the blank)?"

Do not say: "I don't condone it, but [something more positive such as] I understand how/why it happened." In the first example, the media could use just the "I don't condone" part of the sentence. This presents the wrong impression based on the speaker's intent and context.

Think in advance of possible variations on questions so that you can articulate clearly and appropriately in a way which includes direct reference to your activity, decision or action (for example, when a rally to protest budget cuts involved some property damage): "It's easy to replace material goods, but it's far more difficult to replace the effects of a generation's loss of high quality education. We are supporting maintenance of budget support for these programs in a spirit of partnership with the state in which we live and to which we hope to contribute after graduation."

Think along clear, media-like lines...but don't go overboard in your metaphors!

In order for your statements to be used on a TV news program, they should be short, pithy statements, a 5- to 10-second 'bit' (yes, the infamous sound bytes). Remember, the basis of media is manipulation. Media professionals are expert at manipulating what you say and do to meet their own ends. Provide as little opportunity to do this as possible. It is embarrassing and frustrating to have print or electronic media use something you've said in a way totally different from what you intended (and it happens often). Obviously, this is less a problem if the interviewer is sympathetic with your position.

*Do not be confrontational.* Don't let yourself be pulled into a debate situation unless you feel qualified to answer. If you know that someone else can answer a question that you can't, get them into the act. Try not to contradict each another. Do not directly attack a counter-position; rather, provide logical, strong support for your position and actions. Think of some round-about way to answer questions to the advantage of all.

Use a positive approach rather than negative when possible. For example, it would be more powerful and effective to say "Save our Schools [or parks, or forests, or youth recreation program]" than "No more budget or program cuts."

It is worth the time and energy to be well prepared. Impress the media! You do have some power to affect how the media portray you. If you are well prepared and positive, it will make a difference.

adapted from comments by Dr. Ellen Pader, Landscape Architecture & Regional Planning, U. of Massachusetts, 1989