

RESEARCH AND INNOVATION COMMUNICATIONS

WHO WE ARE

The Research and Innovation Communications team sits within the Public Affairs Directorate, alongside teams covering Corporate Communications, Internal Communications, Campaigns and Digital Communications, Events, and Brand and Design.

Our primary function is to communicate Oxford's world-class research, innovation and academic expertise to a range of important audiences – usually via the **mainstream national and international media**. We do this through a variety of methods:

- Press releases for research publications (such as journal articles).
- Placed coverage of ongoing research projects or strands.
- Promotion of experts on newsworthy topics.
- Contributions to multi-channel communications campaigns on strategically chosen themed areas of Oxford research.
- Promotion of stories through Oxford channels, including web, print publications and social media.
- Offering informal media training and advice to researchers and communications colleagues.

We work closely with colleagues in academic divisions and departments, as well as in related units such as Research Services, Oxford University Innovation and GLAM, to tell the stories that show the positive impact Oxford research and innovation is having on people's lives and the advancement of knowledge around the world. As far as possible, we link our work to the University's organisational priorities and strategy.

We also liaise with funders, collaborators, journals and other partner organisations to ensure messages are joined up and efforts are not being duplicated.

The Research and Innovation Communications team comprises four members, each of whom provides an initial point of contact for one of Oxford's academic divisions and generally takes the lead on the handling of research stories with media potential arising from their respective division.

Given our primary focus is on stories that can attract the attention of broader audiences via major, mainstream media outlets, we will always give our honest view on the most appropriate method of disseminating a piece of research – and we'll aim to offer alternative suggestions if we don't feel a press release is the best method of communication.

These alternative routes may include a [blog post on the Oxford website](#), a piece on the [Oxford Medium blog](#), pitching an article to [The Conversation](#), or seeking coverage in specialist media. Often, this can be done with help from local communications officers (many academic departments employ in-house communications staff, whose roles may include elements of content production, external communications or media relations. They may also be able to help publicise, through divisional or departmental channels, news relating to events, prizes or funding awards [see below for further information]). However, communications provision varies widely between departments, as may individual departments' communications policies, so this type of support cannot be guaranteed).

Contact us on 01865 280528 or at news.office@admin.ox.ac.uk.

NB: We are also on hand to offer advice to colleagues in academic divisions and departments on the variety of research and innovation-related media or communications issues that may arise – including responses to potentially difficult situations or enquiries.

WHAT WE DO

As outlined above, we use a range of methods for communicating Oxford research to the wider world. Perhaps most often, this will take the form of a press release to journalists alerting them to a research news story that may be of interest. Our threshold when assessing a request for assistance is to consider whether, based on our experience of working with the media, a story is likely to attract the attention of mainstream national or international journalists working in the relevant field or discipline.

What makes a research news story?

There are many, many research activities and publications happening each day across the University that could be considered newsworthy, but some stand out and are more likely to attract media coverage than others. Factors to consider when thinking about potential coverage include:

- How important is the story in its field? Is it a new discovery, the first time something has been done, or something that is unique? Is it a new technology or breakthrough that will have an impact on people's lives in the future, or change our understanding of the world around us?
- Public interest: is it something that people can relate to personally or are likely to share with others? Is it something that can be explained in terms understandable to people without specialist knowledge of the field?
- Human interest: examples of a societal application of the research can be the perfect way to explain it. If it is a health story, having a patient case study can make it a far more compelling story.
- Timing: is the story dependent on a publication date or opening date, does it coincide with another announcement or anniversary, or is it something that ties neatly into the current news agenda or zeitgeist?
- Compelling multimedia: a good image or video can make all the difference in getting media coverage and achieving enhanced reach on social media.
- The quirkiness factor: is it something unusual or funny that's likely to capture people's imaginations?

When (and why) do we write press releases?

A press release can be a great way of alerting journalists to a research story, as well as giving them the crucial details they'll need to cover the story, condensed into a page or two of text. If we feel the story has the potential to attract coverage in the mainstream media, and that a press release is the best method of dissemination, we will be happy to take the lead on writing it, working with academic and communications colleagues each step of the way.

Unlike an academic paper, a press release should be understandable to a broad audience – a useful way of thinking about it is to imagine how you would tell friends and family about what you've been doing at work. It's generally not designed for academic peers or other specialists.

Journalists appreciate it when press releases include short, punchy and useable quotes from key figures involved in the research – we will almost certainly ask for these when drafting a release. Try not to say ‘we’re really excited’ or ‘this is a huge breakthrough’, but instead explain *why* you are excited or what this actually means within the field or to society more widely.

A press release will also contain the contact details of the institutional press office and/or researchers, and details of the paper so that journalists can find or check information quickly or follow up with additional questions for the researchers. Most (but not all) journalists will not have the time or inclination to read academic papers in full.

It is important that researchers are available on the date that the release is issued and when any embargo lifts, in case there are requests from journalists for interviews or clarifications.

One key thing to note is that often press releases for research publications will be handled in the first instance by a journal, a funder, or a collaborating institution (particularly when that institution has led the research). In these cases, we will very rarely produce or disseminate an additional ‘Oxford’ version of the press release: this is usually an unnecessary duplication of effort and can confuse journalists who prefer a single source of information and point of contact.

How to approach us

If you are a researcher with a story to tell, it’s important to **get in touch with us as soon as possible** (for example, when your paper has been accepted) so that we have time to draft and plan our media outreach, and to ensure that all parties involved have reviewed and approved the messaging. This also gives us time to consider potential multimedia elements, such as video or infographics, that could add value to the story and increase its reach and impact.

Some departments may wish to adopt their own view or policy on the type of research that is suitable for wider public dissemination, either on a thematic or individual basis. These decisions should be made at departmental level – ideally in liaison with departmental communications staff and prior to contact being made by individual researchers with the Public Affairs Directorate. The Research and Innovation Communications team will always work in conjunction with divisional and departmental communications colleagues but is generally unable to make judgements on whether a piece of research would be deemed suitable for external publicity by senior departmental officers.

If you’re unsure about anything, you can speak to a member of the Research and Innovation Communications team on 01865 280528 or at news.office@admin.ox.ac.uk.

Case studies

Famous freak wave recreated in lab mirrors Hokusai’s ‘Great Wave’

The story: A team of engineering researchers from Oxford and Edinburgh successfully recreated, in lab conditions, the famous Draupner freak wave measured in the North Sea in 1995, furthering our understanding of how freak waves are formed in the ocean.

What we did: We worked closely with the researchers and PAD colleagues to produce a strong package of creative, informative and engaging content to present to journalists and other audiences. This included [a press release](#) that sparked widespread coverage of the story around the world, in outlets and publications including BBC Radio 4’s *Today* programme, BBC World Service, *The Times*, *New Scientist* and *VICE*. PAD’s digital media team also [created a short video](#) explaining the research

and its significance. The video received [well over a million views on Twitter](#), as well as 240,000 views and counting on YouTube (in part thanks to embedding by media outlets). Key elements of the research that contributed to this success were the intriguing subject matter, the link with an iconic artwork (Hokusai's 'Great Wave'), a narrative rooted in an actual event in recent history, and an exciting lab-based experimental approach.

Missive from a militant: testimony from the first British suffragette revealed

The story: Oxford history DPhil researcher Lyndsey Jenkins found, in a Canadian archive, a previously unpublicised letter from Annie Kenney, the British activist who became the first woman imprisoned for campaigning for the vote.

What we did: Having worked with Lyndsey to draw out the key details and newsworthy elements of the research, we placed [an exclusive story with the BBC](#), both online and on radio, which was followed up by national and [international media](#). High-quality images of the letter, combined with archive photographs of Annie Kenney, gave the story a strong visual element. The story was [featured on Oxford channels](#), including [strong performance on social media](#), and became one of the BBC's most-read stories of that day.

Virtual reality tool developed to untangle genes

The story: Researchers at Oxford's MRC Weatherall Institute of Molecular Medicine had developed virtual reality tools to explore how gene coding relates to protein shape, with implications for understanding the causes of diseases such as diabetes. The team was also preparing to share its work at the Royal Society's summer exhibition.

What we did: In addition to working with department-based colleagues to prepare a [news story for the University website](#) and social media channels, we produced [a follow-up article](#) to explain the quite-technical topic to a lay audience. PAD's digital communications team filmed the researchers using their technology to demonstrate visually what users could see and why it was useful. An animated video produced by our colleagues at [Oxford Sparks](#) was also included to explain how DNA is translated into proteins.

PAD also met with the team ahead of the Royal Society event to provide some informal media training, including how to deal with tricky questions and how to explain technical work to a broader audience. Media coverage included an item on the BBC's *Breakfast* programme and coverage in a number of [local media outlets](#).

Other requests for support

Events

Every day, dozens of events take place across the collegiate University. Due to the vast number of events, as well as the localised nature of events taking place in Oxford, we rarely promote events to media. We may contact press in special circumstances, for example when the event relates to wider University priorities, has relevance beyond Oxford, and/or includes a prominent speaker (see, for example: [Hillary Rodham Clinton honours human rights champion Eleanor Roosevelt at Oxford](#)).

If you are looking to promote your event, options include advertising on [OxTalks](#) or the University's [central events listings](#).

Funding announcements

The University is fortunate to receive funding and support for our research from a variety of organisations. In most cases, we do not issue press releases for funding awards. This is because media are more likely to be interested in reporting on the results of research at a later stage, rather than the funding itself.

In cases where the funding amount is particularly noteworthy, the funded research will be very impactful, or for large-scale projects with strategic importance to the University, we may post a news story on the Oxford website or carry out media outreach (see, for example: [Oxford secures £17.5 million to lead national AI healthcare programmes](#)).

If you would like an announcement for your research funding, consider approaching your divisional, departmental or college communications officer to write a story for your local website.

Awards and appointments

The high calibre of staff at Oxford means that members of our research and teaching staff win awards for their achievements on a regular basis. We may promote a personal award to the media or post on the Oxford website if the award is nationally or internationally relevant, or of strategic importance to the University. Examples may include Nobel Prizes, significant academy fellowships, or Queen's honours (see, for example: [Fermat's Last Theorem proof secures mathematics' top prize for Sir Andrew Wiles](#) or [Oxford professor appointed Chief Scientific Adviser at Defra](#)).

Academic appointments are rarely of interest to mainstream media and occur on a regular basis throughout the collegiate University. We rarely contact media regarding appointments. In particularly noteworthy cases, we may post a news story on the Oxford website. Contact your local communications officer in the first instance regarding awards and appointments.

Strategic University projects (such as new buildings or research centres)

PAD's Research and Innovation Communications team may also assist, where appropriate and required, with the promotion to external media and via internal channels of major strategic initiatives such as capital projects. This will usually involve working alongside other PAD teams and/or colleagues in other parts of the University (see, for example: [Launch of Oxford BioEscalator will strengthen region's bioscience ecosystem](#)).

Books

Often, publicity for researchers' new books is handled by the publisher. When this isn't the case, and we feel there is a central argument or specific angle that may be of interest to mainstream media, we may be able to help with promotion (see, for example: [Exploitation of Elizabethan child actors revealed](#)).

Innovation

Generally, media work around innovation activities such as the launch of new spinout companies will be handled in the first instance by our colleagues at [Oxford University Innovation](#) (OUI), the

University's research commercialisation arm. However, we do work closely with OUI and can often help amplify stories through central University channels or, on occasion, create original content (see, for example: [Quantum computing: transformative tech for a transforming region](#) or [Oxford University launches social enterprise to help business fight poverty](#)).

We also work closely with colleagues in Research Services on activity that promotes and reflects Oxford University's place in a thriving and innovative regional economy, as well as thinking strategically about how our work can tie into government, funder and University priorities.

GENERAL ADVICE ON WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

Why work with the media?

The main capacities in which, as a researcher, you might work with the media:

- To promote a new piece of research.
- As an expert voice in an area of public debate.

It is critical that you have a specific, carefully thought-out objective in seeking to work with the media, either in promoting your research or as an expert commentator – not simply 'publicity for publicity's sake'.

What is your primary objective for working with the media?

- To contribute the latest evidence-based piece of research to a key area of public debate or interest.
- To communicate valuable knowledge or discovery for the interest or benefit of wider society.
- To develop a media profile as a trusted spokesperson in a particular field.
- To bolster the profile of your department.
- To demonstrate to funders the public interest in your research.
- To align with Oxford University's mission to support 'the advancement of learning by teaching and research and its dissemination by every means'.

Potential benefits of engaging with the media

- Contribute the latest evidence-based research to a key area of public debate.
- Influence public opinion or public policy.
- Provide expert insight and knowledge in an area where there is public confusion or misinformation.
- Boost the profile of your department and the University of Oxford.
- Build a media profile as a trusted spokesperson in a particular field.
- Demonstrate to funders the public interest in your research.
- Potentially contribute to a REF impact case study (NB: media coverage may only be referenced if there is evidence that a change has occurred because of it – for example, the media coverage has led to subsequent impact such as policy change or behavioural change). [See here for more info on REF.](#)
- Helping to support [Oxford University's vision](#): 'We will work as one Oxford bringing together our staff, students and alumni, our colleges, faculties, departments and divisions to provide

world-class research and education. We will do this in ways which benefit society on a local, regional, national and global scale.'

- Helping to support [Oxford University's commitments](#): 'To engage with the public and policymakers to shape our research and education and to encourage the widest possible use of our research findings and expertise.'

Potential risks

The media landscape is very fluid and is subject to rapid, sometimes last-minute changes in interest and priority. Nothing is guaranteed, so there is always a chance that a lot of effort and resource can be expended on something that has minimal or no results.

Carefully constructed press releases can occasionally be misinterpreted or misrepresented by media. This is out of our control to a large extent, although in cases of inaccuracy or extreme sensationalism we can request corrections or clarifications to coverage.

Media stories can now quickly take on a life of their own on social media that can open them up to both positive and hostile feedback. This is something to be prepared for – particularly in a controversial field.

It is not possible to guarantee who is credited in coverage. The media usually only has space for one or two references – for example, 'Oxford University' and 'The Lancet', rather than names of departments or a full list of collaborators.

Useful external resources for working with the media

Science Media Centre (SMC)

The Science Media Centre is an excellent source of knowledge and support around research and the press. We in the Public Affairs Directorate at Oxford work closely with and alongside the SMC to support their aims: 'To provide, for the benefit of the public and policymakers, accurate and evidence-based information about science and engineering through the media, particularly on controversial and headline news stories when most confusion and misinformation occurs.'

Working with the SMC: <http://www.sciencemediacentre.org/working-with-us/for-scientists/>

Top tips for working with the media: <https://www.sciencemediacentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/SMC-Top-Tips-2015.pdf>

Wellcome

This is an excellent and comprehensive guide for researchers and academics on working with the media, including practical tips for interviews with radio, TV and online: [How to work with the media](#)

American Association for the Advancement of Science

[Tips for working with the media.](#)