

Selling a Story: How to Write a Successful Press Release

Elizabeth Pearson

News Editor, BBC Sky at Night Magazine
Elizabeth.pearson@immediate.co.uk
+44 1173 148 759

Keywords

Media, press release

Press releases are an important part of communicating new discoveries with the general public. However, if they are confusing or difficult to read then they are unlikely to be picked up by media outlets. This article details how to create a successful press release by addressing a series of points: learning how to identify the audience; writing text that is both eye catching and clear; including multimedia and contact details; getting your press release to the media; and timing.

How to write a press release

The media are becoming increasingly captivated by astronomy, with mainstream channels devoting more air time and column inches to the field while smaller specialist blogs and websites are gaining growing audiences. And they are always hungry for more stories. One of the classic ways of making sure a paper is reported on is via the publication of a press release. However, if this fails to captivate the editor or writer reading it, it is going to get thrown out immediately. This article will lay out how best to ensure your press release is not one of those that is passed over.

Know your audience

The first question writers ask themselves is who is the audience? Writing a press release is no different. Identify who you want to appeal to: the mainstream media or a specialist site? Television? Radio? Online? Print?

Once you know this, keep it in mind throughout the process of writing a press release. Mainstream media want easily accessible stories about things that are ground breaking, so a press release to them needs to sell the importance of the discovery. Specialist publications want to be able to delve into the details and show their expertise, so it is important to include the facts and figures.

Get off to a good start

There are three questions which need to be answered as soon as possible: What is the story about? Why is it news? Why do we care?

“What is the story about?” should be answered in the headline. Make it clear what the story is about. Occasionally a witty headline might catch an editor’s attention, but it will likely be passed over if they cannot see what the story is. There have been several cases where a badly worded introduction has led to a finding’s being widely misinterpreted, such as the University of Exeter’s release “Rotten Egg Gas Holds Key to Healthcare Therapies” which was transmuted into the incorrect (but more click worthy) “Farts Cure Cancer”¹.

“Why is it news?” means describing what it is that makes this result worthy of report over the next paper in the journal. To be news, a finding has to create some shift in the way we understand the Universe, so make sure the reader knows what that is.

“Why do we care?” asks what it is that will make people stop and read the story. Answering this depends on the audience you are appealing to. Generalist media tend to pick up only science stories that either have a profound but understandable effect on our understanding of the Universe, or directly affect the person in the street, or tap into people’s dreams, like space travel, aliens or anything that appears in science fiction. Specialist science and space media care about much smaller stories, but they must still have some element of interest beyond being another new result.

Editors also love superlatives: first, best, biggest, fastest, furthest. If you can find one, then it should absolutely be included, but do not twist a story just to create one as it will only lead to confusion and mis-reporting.

If by the second or third paragraph all three of these questions have been answered then you are off to a good start.

The rest of the story

Once you have established what the story is in the first few paragraphs, start going into the details. Get the important facts out first then move onto the whys and wherefores of how the research was done, ensuring you include details of all the telescopes, instruments and organisations that were involved. You should also ensure that there is a forward-looking part which details what comes next and how this new result will impact the field from now on.

Being too technical is the bane of most efforts to communicate science to the public. Press releases are no different. The most important thing at this stage is not to get lost in a sea of impenetrable jargon, technical terms and bad English. Remember, most of the editors and writers reading the release will not be experts in the given field, and may not have a scientific background at all. They could be receiving hundreds of releases a day, so if the press release cannot be understood on a quick pass, then it runs the risk of being overlooked, or reported incorrectly. By all means use technical terms, but make sure you explain them clearly as soon as they appear.

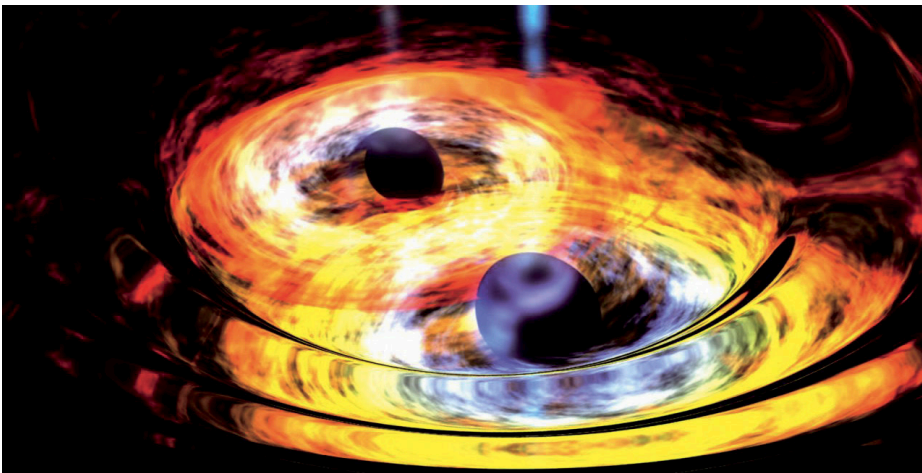


Figure 1. Artists' impressions are a useful way to illustrate topics where the source observations, while scientifically interesting, aren't particularly visually arresting. There are many sources that give away impressions of general topics such as the black holes above, but if you want your discovery to stand out it might be worth commissioning one. Credit: NASA

That said, it is important to ensure you still say something definitive. People often believe that simplifying for a lay audience requires stripping out all the details. Sentences such as "this will teach us a lot about the Solar System" or similar, while true, tell me nothing: what will it teach us? How? Why is it important to know?

If you want your release to become a news article, quotes from the people involved are an absolute must as they give stories authority. Make sure that every key point in your press release has a matching quote to go with it.

A human angle can also lift an otherwise mundane story to a much more interesting level. Stories that involve members of the public or young people always do well, as do ones with an anecdote or two. Something along the lines of "we came up with the idea over a beer" or "we nearly lost all our work because someone didn't back it up" can connect the reader to the story and is the kind of thing writers look out for.

Multimedia

Any news story is about more than mere words. Images, videos and sound clips not only help to tell the narrative, but draw attention to the story as well.

For all media bar radio, images are an absolute must and if none is supplied it can be grounds for dropping a story. Sometimes this is easy: a beautiful shot

of the nebula being studied for instance. However, if the report is on theoretical work on dark matter then it might be trickier.

There are thousands of artists' impressions that are free to use courtesy of NASA, ESA, ESO and other space agencies. Half an hour of hunting should turn up something usable, though be sure you have the right to use it.

If your budget can stretch to it, it might be worth commissioning your own artist's impression. The price for this varies depending on the artist and usage agreement, but costs are usually around a few hundred US dollars.

If there is nothing that will suit, include an image of the telescope used, or a shot of the researchers at work on the task.

Any image supplied needs to be as large as possible; roughly 3000 pixels for print or 1000 pixels for web. If the image contains any annotations or markings, then there should be an unannotated copy available as well so that labels can be added in the house style. It is also advisable to have some good quality headshots of researchers on standby should anyone request them, as some house styles require portraits of interviewed experts.

Video is also a great bonus, and not just for television. As news moves online, short videos can really help to popularise a story, particularly on social media. A short visualisation with some of the facts super-

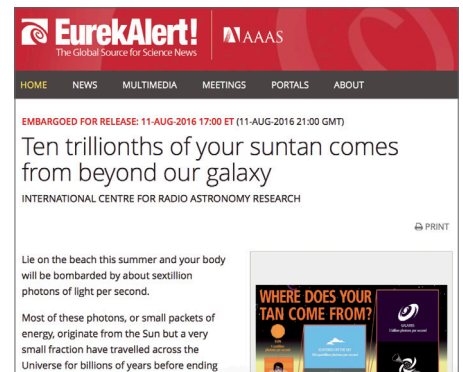


Figure 2. A screenshot from an embargoed press release on EurekAlert. Releasing a story early, but under embargo, is a good way to ensure that your story hits the news at the best time. When signing up to a news dissemination site, such as EurekAlert, journalists agree to respect the embargo, so you need not worry about your work leaking early. Credit: EurekAlert

imposed on it, or an interview with one of the researchers, will make a story stand out.

Contact is key

Even if you fulfil all the above steps, there will always be something left out that an editor wants and if they cannot contact the relevant people then the story may be unusable. Make sure you include contact details for both the press officer in charge of the release and several, if not all, of the researchers referenced and quoted in the article. The latter will hopefully be inundated with requests for further interviews, so make sure they are okay with that before including their contact details.

If you have access to radio or television recording equipment through your institution or otherwise, list this as well.

Getting out there

Most press releases that I receive come through news distribution agencies that act as middle men between the media and researchers.

The American Astronomical Society has a forwarding list that goes out to over 2000 reporters and public information officers at no charge. This does not have much mass appeal, but it is great if you are targeting space enthusiasts.

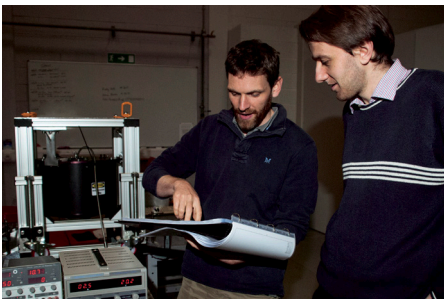


Figure 3. An image of engineers David Pearson and William Taylor used to illustrate a feature about the role of engineers in astronomy. Sometimes a human angle can lend relevance to an otherwise distant topic. For a press release about the work of engineers at the UK Astronomy Technology Centre, as in this case, it might be worth including an image of the engineers involved. Credit: Dr David Pearson

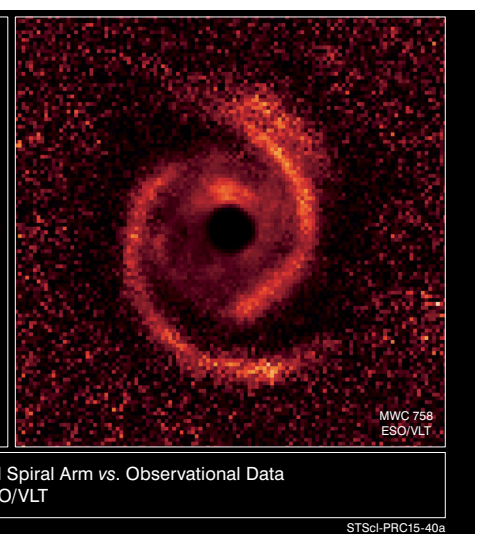
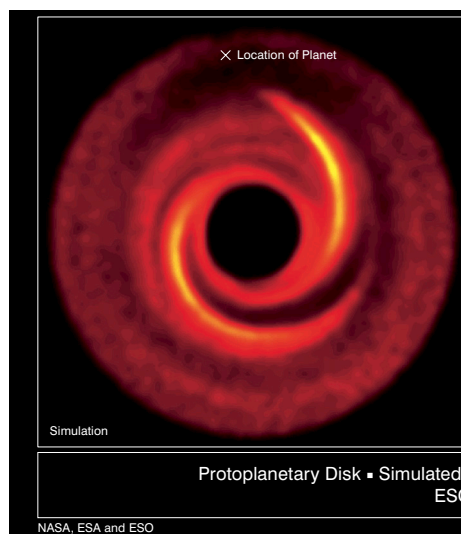
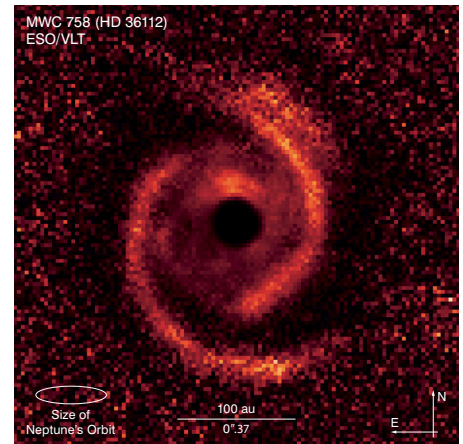
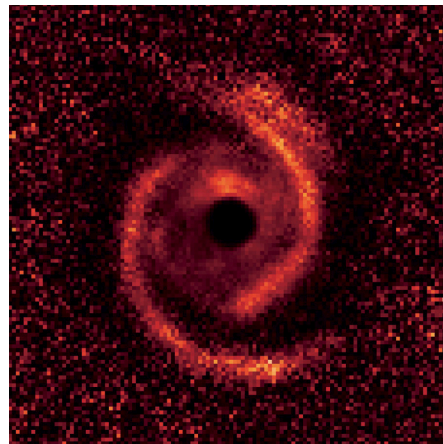
If you want a wider appeal then there are many agencies that distribute general science such as EurekAlert² and AlphaGalileo³, or general news, like Newswire⁴. There is usually a fee associated with these services, so your institution may already subscribe to a specific one.

Some researchers prefer to contact press officers directly. Press listings, such as ResponseSource⁵ and Vuelio (UK centric)⁶ can supply contact details for most media outlets. A phone call to a specific editor ensures they know about your release, though some writers find the practice annoying.

Timing

Timing can be vital when considering a press release. Most news outlets will look for stories within usual working hours. Even 24-hour news outlets will do the bulk of their news finding during the day. Most editors will decide what they are going to cover in the morning, then spend the rest of the day working on it. If something comes in at 5pm, it won't get looked at until the next day, at which point it has already become outdated. Releasing the story early under embargo, giving the media time to write it up without its becoming irrelevant, can help with this problem. However, if the embargo is longer than 24 hours then there is a chance that the story will be forgotten about.

News tends to operate on a yearly cycle, and some months are lighter on news than others. Astronomy news is often seen by the mainstream as 'soft' news. The less hard



Protoplanetary Disk • Simulated Spiral Arm vs. Observational Data
ESO/VLT
NASA, ESA and ESO

Figure 4. If you are supplying a compilation of several images which are annotated, it is a good idea to also supply the individual images in a clean format. Credit: NASA, ESA, and Z. Levay (STScI)

news there is, the more likely it is that an astronomy story will make the cut. Most countries will have a month or so in the year when the government is taking a break or similar, meaning there are fewer political and business news stories, so if possible it might be best to release during this time.

There is also a drop in the number of science-related press releases being sent out between June and September in many countries, when universities have their summer breaks. This can mean that specialist publications are left with few stories to cover, and it improves the chances of yours being selected.

There are many factors that can determine whether or not a press release is picked up for further reporting, but following these steps should help to give yours the best chance.

Notes

- 1 University of Exeter's "Rotten Egg Gas Holds Key to Healthcare Therapies" press release: http://www.exeter.ac.uk/news/research/title_393168_en.html
- 2 EurekAlert: www.eurekalert.org
- 3 AlphaGalileo: www.alphagalileo.org
- 4 Newswire: www.newswire.com
- 5 ResponseSource: www.responsesource.com
- 6 Vuelio: www.vuelio.com

Biography

Elizabeth Pearson is News Editor for BBC Sky at Night Magazine. She obtained her PhD in Extragalactic Astrophysics from Cardiff University.