A guide to working with UCL media relations for academic/research staff

What makes a good story?
- A substantial, new research finding that has clear, real-world impact or implications for the field
- A time ‘hook’ – why now? Is it new or does it contribute to a story currently topping the news agenda?
- A strong visual element
- Human interest – will the public relate to it?
- Things that are surprising, quirky or controversial

Importance of research doesn't always translate into media interest – which is driven by what users want. The more points it covers above, the greater the likelihood of it being reported by mainstream media.

If you think you have a good story, please get in touch directly or submit your story online.

We ask for:
- As much notice as possible (at least a week) so we can include the news in our schedule of work, devise a strategy and handle the logistics.
- A lay summary paragraph describing the news and giving a sense of the audience you are trying to reach.
- A copy of the research paper or information you would like promoting.
- Contact details and your availability for checking text to promote your news and media interviews.

How we operate
- Appraising the news. A press release isn’t always the most effective way to reach a target audience so we may recommend pitching the story as an exclusive or using other UCL communications channels such as:
  - Website news stories – at the central, faculty or department/institute level
  - Social media including Twitter and Facebook pages
  - e-newsletters
  - Flickr galleries
  - Feature pieces
We can work with your faculty/department communications contact to promote the news.
- Working with key people from the outset to draft releases together. All UCL press releases conform to a particular style so we need to be involved from the outset in writing them. We’ll always seek full-copy approval before issue.
- Looking after the reputation of UCL and our media relations team. We only issue press releases we have prepared as we risk our reputation if we over-use media contacts or send out poor quality releases.

Promoting research papers
- Please notify us as soon as the paper is accepted by a journal as we ideally work to a deadline of when it first appears online, ahead of print.
- We issue press releases under embargo 2-3 days before online publication to give reporters time to draft their articles ahead of the news breaking.
- Do forward us any correspondence from third parties who approach you about press releases, particularly if any deadlines are fast-approaching.
- If the research is a collaboration, we generally work to coordinate a joint release that can be adapted for each partner’s own channels to avoid sending multiple releases on the same news to journalists. Any additional releases should be clearly adding value (e.g. highlighting the UK author).
- Authors need to be available for interviews if there is interest in the story (we can offer advice for anyone who needs it ahead of interviews).

Stories that don’t work for mainstream media
- We promote news that doesn’t generally work for external media – e.g. centre openings, awards and appointments – through UCL’s own communications channels rather than by press releases, as such announcements usually don’t attract significant external interest.
- For highly newsworthy events or high-profile speakers we can potentially approach selected media to let them know, but would need good notice and a very clear idea of what the key speaker is going to say and their availability to speak to media.
- If we are given enough notice, we can potentially attract the public to attend your event (e.g. an exhibition or lecture) by approaching listings media.

Faculty/departmental communications contacts
Most UCL faculties and departments have a communications contact who can help promote your story on any channels they manage e.g. departmental e-newsletters, Twitter and website news pages.

Please contact both your communications contact and media relations when you think you have big news coming up. Your local comms staff may have subject –specific media contacts, but they generally don’t have access to the extensive up-to-date media database and monitoring services that we do centrally.

UCL experts database
Another very effective means for you to get media coverage can be by providing expert comment. Our team receive calls from the media on a daily basis seeking academics to comment on a wide range of issues. If you are interested in providing comment in relation to your field of work, please register your profile on our UCL experts database.

Case studies

The following case studies are included to give a sense of the kinds of stories we regularly work on.

Case study 1 – Which fossil fuels must remain in the ground to limit global warming?

In January 2015, Professor Paul Ekins and Dr Christophe McGlade published work in Nature reporting that a third of oil reserves, half of gas reserves and over 80% of current coal reserves globally should remain in the ground and not be used before 2050 if global warming is to stay below the 2°C target agreed by policy makers.
UCL media relations worked with the researchers to promote the findings through a press release and Science Media Centre media briefing. The briefing was attended by 30+ science editors in the UK and the researcher’s presentation and Q&A session was recorded and shared with science editors globally.


The study had impact beyond media with Governmental bodies from different countries either getting in touch or discussing the news in debates. A Washington Post article cited the findings as the scientific reason for Barack Obama vetoing the Keystone XL pipeline. The news was also covered on the UN Climate Change website and The Guardian repeatedly used the statistics in its ‘Keep it in the Ground’ campaign.

Professor Ekins said: “Getting impact from academic work, where appropriate and possible, is becoming increasingly important. Academics usually need help with this – we certainly did. The UCL media team set up the initial press briefing, promoted our study through a wide range of channels after it, directed media enquiries our way when necessary, and monitored media coverage. We are aware of over 600 different cases of our work being reported, ranging from major national and international news outlets to more specialist and niche media. We could not possibly have handled all this ourselves. Working with the UCL media team we were able to respond when we needed to, while getting on with our other work at the same time.”

Case study 2 – HIV spreads like internet malware and should be treated earlier

In April 2015, a cross­faculty team of UCL researchers published a paper describing a new model for HIV progression, finding that it spreads in a similar way to some computer worms and predicting that early treatment is key to staving off AIDS. The work was a collaboration between researchers in Infection & Immunity and Computer Science.

UCL Media Relations worked with researchers across both departments to promote the findings through a press release and direct contact with a few select journalists.

The story was covered in the Guardian and Daily Mail, as well as a selection of specialist outlets. This helped to promote the study’s findings to a broad audience, raising the profile of the research and showcasing the value of interdisciplinary working.

The study’s lead author, Changwang Zhang from Computer Science, said: “The study would not be so widely perceived without Media Relations’ rich media connections and professional press release. We are very grateful for their help in promoting our research.”

Case study 3 – Discovery of George Orwell’s ‘drunk and incapable’ arrest record

In December 2014, a paper published by Dr Luke Seaber (UCL English) in the journal Notes and Queries outlined the implications of a court record unearthed in a London archive
detailing George Orwell's 1931 conviction for being ‘drunk and incapable’. The document confirmed Orwell's account of the incident, lending foundation to the lore surrounding Orwell's inherent truthfulness as a writer.

The team worked with Dr Seaber to highlight the discovery to key media via a press release and secured coverage including in the Guardian (attracting over 5,000 ‘shares’), Culture 24 and a comment piece in The Conversation.

The story was also highlighted on UCL's central channels including Twitter, the Homepage and various e-newsletters.

Case study 4 – Strange Creatures put on display at UCL

In March 2015, the Grant Museum of Zoology at UCL launched a new exhibition, ‘Strange Creatures: The art of unknown animals’. The exhibition explored how imagery has been used to bring newly discovered animals into the public eye and featured a range of artworks set amongst the museum’s permanent displays.

UCL Media Relations co-ordinated with Jack Ashby (Manager of the Grant Museum) and the Marketing Manager for UCL PACE to promote the exhibition through a press release, and direct pitches to journalists who had previously shown an interest in the Grant Museum’s activities.

The exhibition garnered feature articles in Guardian, Daily Mail, Times (£) and BBC History Magazine and was picked up by numerous listings, including; Time Out, Metro, Culture 24, Waitrose Magazine, Londonist and other London outlets. An interview with Jack Ashby about the exhibition was also featured on BBC London 94.9 in May 2015 as part of their coverage on the Museums at Night festival.