

# How to Write a Heritage Press Release

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**BAJR Practical Guide**

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## 1 Introduction

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News articles are an excellent way to disseminate information about your work to the wider public. However, it can just as easily lead to misleading information, like the article 'Stone Age Britons' used 'Saunas'— with an unrelated image of Stonehenge.

[[Daily Mail](#): Feb 28<sup>th</sup> 2011].

The first reaction to this sort of reporting might be anger, but once you understand the news process it is easy to understand why these mistakes can occur and take some steps towards their eradication. One way to avoid such mistakes happening to your work is by creating a properly formatted press release.

A **press release** is a very specific type of writing. A successful press release follows certain guidelines including limiting the information to one page, carefully crafting a headline, summing up the story in the first paragraph, including quotes, providing images and contact details etc. The purpose of this guide is to serve as an introduction to writing a good press release, aimed at archaeologists.

## 2 The News Process

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A basic understanding how information becomes 'news' is the key to appreciating why news articles can get facts muddled or wrong. This first section of the guide presents a generic 'news process' applicable to any news agency (each agency will have different procedures but will follow a similar pattern).

### How Stone Age man kept his pores clean... in the SAUNA

By DAILY MAIL REPORTER  
UPDATED: 14:45, 28 February 2011



The remains of a 4,500-year-old sauna have been discovered by archaeologists excavating a Stone Age temple.

They unearthed the foundations of the building at Marden Henge, near Devizes in Wiltshire.

Located close to the River Avon, the neolithic 'sauna' was in a key position overlooking a ceremonial area at the site.



1: Nothing quite like matching an iconic image that does not actually relate directly to the story. Be sure to provide good images yourself.

### Who are Reporters?

Most reporters do not focus on archaeology but on a wide range of topics. In most organisations, a reporter will cover a broad range of topics. Meaning they are **not experts** in a particular subject but may write about a bus strike one day, a house fire the next and about your Mesolithic find the day after.

Each day a reporter will sift through hundreds of press releases and contacts for potential stories or 'leads'. Reporters select the most promising stories (usually between 2-5 possible articles), which they forward onto their editor or sub-editor, who can decide to run with all or none of the stories. If the reporter does not get his/her stories regularly selected for publication, they could soon be out of a job— hence the need for an attractive story line, which will capture the interest of the reporter, the editor and the intended audience!

After a story is selected, the reporter has to produce an article submission, sometimes on **the same day!** Not all articles are written in a single day but many are. Reporters might also be assigned other stories, beyond those they pitch, which are required to be finished right away— such as breaking news stories. This represents a very short time frame for the production of a decent article— usually only a few hours between the meeting with the editor (around 10 or 11 in the morning) and the deadline for submission (around 2 or 3 in the afternoon). For a single story, this means getting all the information, quotes, and writing it up, with perfect grammar and spelling, in a short space of time. Sometimes reporters don't even have that much time:

*"When a story breaks, you could take a couple hours to do research, call to sources, and write a contextualized, edited piece—but by that time, 5 of your competitors will have posted on the story. You will look slow and readers will have moved onto the next thing. The reality is that original reporting and careful editing fall by the wayside in the desire to be fast." <https://medium.com/@bekahgrant/confessions-of-an-ex-tech-journalist-5ddafba1d4d4>*

Imagine writing ONE fully researched article in a few hours. Now imagine if you had to write several stories. This is why crafting a good press release is so important. Reporters are not experts and have a very short period of time to write an article. A well-crafted press release will give them all the information they need to write a good article in a short period of time.



2: Think about whether it really is news and try to avoid laughable hyperbole – it will stay with you for a long time in your professional career.

### 3 Press Release- Step by step Guide

Creating a press release will help prevent your important archaeological news from being ignored by the press, changed beyond recognition, miss-quoted, or any of the other terrible things that could happen to it. This is because the press release gives reporters all the important information they need in easy to review and compact form. Start by following these steps:

#### 3.1 Who Will Be Interested?

The first thing you should do before writing a press release is to ask yourself what is newsworthy about your work? Some basic concepts to use when deciding on a topic will help you to consider why people will want to read the article and why someone would publish it:

- **Timeliness:** Is the story new/current?
- **Proximity:** Whom does it impact? This will be discussed further in the next section but simply put, local newspapers will run local stories.
- **Prominence:** Who is involved? Celebrities and politicians are interesting to readers.
- **Impact:** Will this news shape the future or because this is archaeology will it change how we look at the past?
- **Human Interest:** Is there something interesting about the people doing the work.
- **Conflict/Scandal:** Archaeology and tabloids are best kept apart– use carefully.

#### 3.2 Right Story for the Right News Organization

Different news organisations will be interested in your story for different reasons. Knowing what stories they are likely to choose will increase your chances of getting into the news.



#### Local pensioner helps find lost battlefield



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3: Think about an eye catching headline and a visually appealing image to grab attention of both the readers - and of course the reporter to begin with!

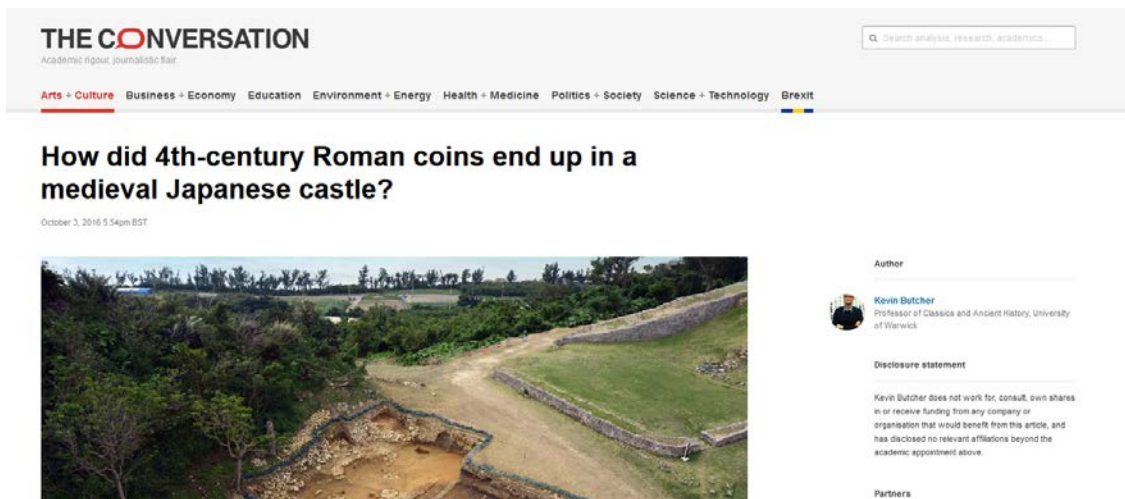
**Local/Regional:** Hoover Adams, an editor and owner of a local paper, once said he would publish half the phone book in his newspaper if he could because people would read it to see if they were named. He said, 'All of us know that the main reason anybody reads a local newspaper is for the local names and places. That's the one thing we can do better than anybody else'. Headlines such as '*Local Pensioners Help Uncover Battle site in Localtown*' or '*Developer Funds Local Discovery of our Roman Past*' will be picked up by local news. Even if your project is not ground breaking, if it is local and lets the public know about what you are doing in their town, they are likely to run the story.

**National:** These are stories that will interest not just local people but also those living 100 miles away. An article headline, such as *'Metal Detectorists Aid Archaeologists in Locating the Lost Medieval Battle at Localtown'* is less likely to be picked up, while headline *'Unique Viking Grave Reveal the Warrior Woman at Localtown'* is intriguing enough to tempt the press and the public.

### International:

When we talk about international news, we are talking about news that has been picked up in other countries by their national organisations. There are not international news organisations but rather national news organisations that include news from other countries. If your discovery is important/interesting enough to attract the international interest, then it is likely other news organisations will be in touch with you, rather than the other way round.

Note that such 'international newsworthy' stories will need to be describing a **landmark discovery**, which will have to contain the **Oldest, Unique, Richest, Largest**, site or find, comparable to finding a **Lost Civilization, Mummies and Pyramids** (and of course the headline 'Adventure in the desert/jungle/artic/underwater' can work wonders, if applicable). However, just because the story will require the standout magnification of importance to be used at this level, does not actually mean you have to use the **hyperbole throughout!**



The screenshot shows a news article from 'THE CONVERSATION' website. The article title is 'How did 4th-century Roman coins end up in a medieval Japanese castle?' and it is dated October 3, 2016, 5:54pm BST. The author is Kevin Butcher, Professor of Classics and Ancient History, University of Warwick. The article includes a disclosure statement and a list of partners.

4: From the New York Times to the Independent, China to India and all over the world, this was international news, which generated speculation, discussion and questions.

**General Vs Specialist:** The New York Times or the Guardian are general news sources and will publish an article on anything, as long as they think it will be something their readers will be interested in. In contrast, Archaeology Magazine will publish only on archaeology. Make sure you know if the publishers will actually be interested in your article before contacting them.

### 3.3 Multiple Press Releases

In reality, your work could have several hooks and target multiple types of organisations— e.g. local people find x, x will be of interest to people who read y magazine. You do not have to be limited to one storyline but each press release should be crafted with specific audience in mind. If you need to write a press release for local news and a different one for a specialist publication, then do so.

## 4 Press Release Outline

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### 4.1 Writing the Press Release

Once you have a suitable subject and an appropriate target audience, follow this outline to create your press release:

#### 4.1.1 Release Date

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At the top of the press release indicate whether it is for immediate release or under embargo— a date until which it cannot be published. Generally, immediate release is preferable, as not everyone will follow the embargo and other journalists will be angry if someone publishes days before them.

#### 4.1.2 The Press Release Headline

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Make it short, sweet and punchy: Try and catch the imagination of the potential reader. Attempt to stay away from puns and hyperbole, but don't be so dull that nobody will read further – this is your hook (why people will read this).

**'A large ceramic bodysherd has been found at the site of a new three-bedroom house development, suggesting there may have been 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD period activity in the area'.**

Is **NOT** going to catch the eye!

***'Pottery at new house site reveals Roman origins of Localtown'.***

Is **MUCH** better (but can you improve on it?)

For good examples of headlines, have a look at the stories from the Daily Mail's Science correspondent Sarah Griffiths –[see how she constructs Headlines](#)– with questions and statements followed up by a short sub heading.

#### 4.1.3 The Press Release Lead

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Write a press release in the same way as a news article because if a reporter is very busy they may just copy and paste your text. Read a number of news articles and you will see they all follow this pattern: information is presented in decreasing order of importance, what journalists call the 'inverted pyramid', with the most important info (the widest part of the pyramid) at the top. This is because editors may delete the bottom paragraphs to make an article fit.

The lead paragraph includes the **whole** story in a condensed form. If people were only to read the lead, they would have everything they need. The first sentence should grab the reader and say concisely what is happening– **who, what, when, where, why (5Ws)**. Start the paragraph with a location (i.e. **Dunbar, East Lothian**):

*Dunbar, East Lothian* – In recent excavations at Dunbar High Street, archaeologists from CHC Archaeology have uncovered the remains of a medieval cobbled street and fish shop dating back over 500 years. An open day is scheduled for this coming weekend, thanks to the support of local developer– ABC Construction Ltd.

The whole story is set out in one paragraph!

“I’ve always been a believer that if I’ve got two hours in which to write a story, the best investment I can make is to spend the first hour and forty-five minutes of it getting a good lead, because after that everything will come easily” – *Don Wycliff, Journalist*.

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The same is true of a press release.

### 4.1.4 The Body Text and Quotes

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The rest of the press release serves to back up/clarify the information you have provided in the lead and the headline – in decreasing order of importance. Create separate paragraphs for each of the **5Ws** that you mentioned in the lead paragraph, starting with the WHY is this important. Go into more detail, but keep the writing tight and to the point. Avoided specialist’s language and but if you use they explain any technical terms.

Be sure to include quotes from people involved in the story. Quoting a person by name helps readers understand and remember the information more clearly. You could write something like:

Dr David Hook of CHC Archaeology said, *“This find represents a paradigm shift in our understanding of the medieval period in Scotland”*. Hook continued, *“Opening the excavations to the public has also allowed us to share our discoveries with local people and we are grateful to ABC Construction for this opportunity.”*

Always include hyperlinks in your story, giving readers the opportunity to access further relevant information. Keep the total length of the body text to approximately 350 words– about one page (500 words max).

Go and read news articles. You will see they follow this structure too- lead paragraph, detailed explained in the proceeding paragraphs, etc. The reason why you write your press release like a news article is because if the reporter is very busy they will just cut and paste your press release into an article.

### **4.1.5 The Boilerplate**

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The very last paragraph is called the 'boilerplate'— an old newspaper term meaning a block of standard text that's used over and over again. The information should include company history/background, industry, and the address of your organisation. Providing background information helps journalists understand why this is important and who you are.

Place your boilerplate right above the three # # #'s (this is the press convention).

Below this, add further contact details: For further information about this topic contact...

Media Contact:

Person Name:

Phone Number:

E-mail:

Website:

### **4.1.6 Multi-media inclusion**

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Always include images in your press release! Sometimes the press may only publish the image with a short description. Choose images that will draw in readers, 3-7 images should be sufficient.

You can also include links to download raw video footage from your website, provided you have it (do not edit it, as they will do this themselves). This might seem like a strange thing to include for a newspaper article, but most newspapers have multimedia websites or Facebook pages. Video is very popular on social media and is the number one driver of public engagement, so all news organisations like to include them with articles.



## 4.2 Key Words – choosing the correct language

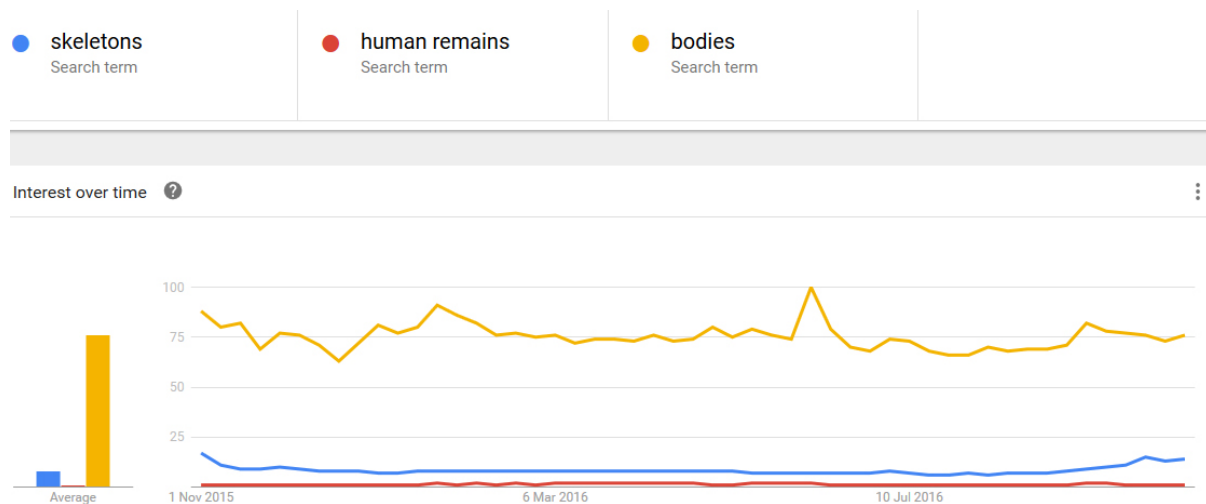
As an archaeologist you often use a highly specialised language relating to your specific field of expertise but this can sometimes lead to using terms that are not readily understood by the other 99.999% of society. People use search engines to find news about topics they are interested in so you need to include the words they search for.

### Exercise:

Headline: 'Human Remains Found in Local Town'

Would people actually search for the term **human remains**, or would they use words like **skeletons** or **bodies**? Use the following resources to see what terms are most popular and likely to be searched for by people:

[Google Trends](#): discover the popularity of topics on Google's search worldwide or by regions.



You can see that *Human Remains* and even *Skeletons* are not very popular– while *Bodies* is by far the most used search term.

[AdWords Keyword Planner](#): Used for Google ads you can search for keyword ideas and compare how keywords perform.

[Bing Trends](#): Like Google trends but for Bing.

[Bing Webmaster Keyword Research Beta](#): Find what people are searching for on Bing.

[Facebook Trending Topics](#): the most popular topics and hashtags, depending on the users' likes, the location, and the general popularity of each story.

[Twitter Search](#): Find what people are talking about on Twitter by keyword, hashtag, or user name.

## 5 Example press release:

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For immediate release  
29<sup>th</sup> September 2016

**Release Date**

**Headline: Short Descriptive Punchy**

# BU archaeologists uncover 6,000-year-old long barrow in the Cotswolds

**Lead Paragraphs**

A 6,000-year-old prehistoric burial monument has been uncovered northeast of Cirencester in the Cotswolds by archaeologists from Bournemouth University. Believed to be around 1,000 years older than Stonehenge, the massive mound, 60m long by 15m wide, was carefully built of soil and stone by the first farmers living in the area around 4000 BC. It provided a resting place for the dead and a symbol of identity for the living.

**Start of Body Text**

The barrow was first noticed about ten years ago and has since been studied through a wide range of geophysical surveys and evaluations that confirmed its identification. In the summer of 2016 proper excavations began with a team of around 80 students, graduates and archaeologists from across the world working to explore the stonework of the mound and define possible chambers inside the structure that might contain burials. Traditionally, up to 50 men, women and children were buried in such monuments over a period of several centuries, long before the discovery of metal working.

**Expert 1**

Leading the dig, Professor Tim Darvill, Director of the Centre for Archaeology and Anthropology at BU, said: *“It’s very exciting to have found this barrow because of the opportunities it offers for researching the first farmers on the Cotswolds. Long barrows were amongst the first substantial structures to be built in Britain – the earliest monumental architecture we know of. Previously unknown examples do not turn up very often and no barrow like this has been excavated for more than 20 years. It really is a fantastic opportunity to bring to bear some of the recent advances in archaeological and anthropological science in order to find out more about these sites.”*

**Paragraph can be removed without damaging the sense of the whole article**

He added: *“There are so many questions to be asked, but the most important are the simple ones. Who built these great stone monuments and were prepared to invest so much time and effort in their construction? Where did they get their ideas from? How were they built? When were they built? Why were they built? And can we get to know something of the beliefs held by the communities that used them and were ultimately buried within them?”*

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Archaeology graduate Charlie Scovell, who joined the dig, said: *“It’s been great. We’ve been camping in the field right next to the site. We’ve got a long barrow which is quite a special opportunity – you don’t get to dig a pristine long barrow in this way that often, so I’m really lucky to be here!*

*“Practical experience is key really – for me, it’s the way that I learn. I think getting out and doing as much field work as possible is really important.”*

**Quote from Student 1**

**Paragraph can be removed without damaging the sense of the whole article**

BU Senior Lecturer in Forensic and Biological Anthropology, Dr Martin Smith, led the specialist team dealing with the burials: *“We had a cattle skull placed in what we call the ‘forecourt’ of the monument – a wide arena edged by a tall façade at the front of the structure where we think various sorts of ceremonies and communal rituals would have been performed. This seems to be a theatrical space”.*

**Expert 2**

*“Before the Neolithic, when people are living by hunting and gathering, even a really good hunter could probably only share their kill with eight-ten people. But once people started farming things changed. By growing crops and herding animals, good farmers who looked after their gardens and livestock could build up really big herds and surplus produce in a way that allowed some individuals to become more wealthy than others. Were these the people buried in the long barrows? Or was everyone given a place there? These kinds of social questions are matters that we hope this new site will shed new light on.”*

**Hyperlink**

Bournemouth University’s Department of Archaeology, Anthropology & Forensic Science have a **team of experts** within the department committed to educating the next generation of archaeologists, anthropologists and forensic scientists, as well as to furthering the understanding of and knowledge within their chosen fields through varied research projects.

**Boilerplate paragraph**

ENDS

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**End symbol** - indicates that there is no further copy text

**Contact:** If you are interested in more information, contact project leader Professor Tim Darvill on [xxxxxx@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:xxxxxx@bournemouth.ac.uk).

xxxxxxxx xxxxxxxx

PR and Corporate Communications Manager

Email: [xxxxxx@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:xxxxxx@bournemouth.ac.uk)

Tel: +44 (0)1202 xxxxxxxxx

Mobile: +44 (0)7715 xxxxxxxxx

**Contact details for further information**



*Captions © Bournemouth University Left to right.*

*Aerial shot of students at the Cotswolds dig;*

*Bournemouth University student working on site;*

*Archaeologists working on excavation;*

*Bournemouth University students record the excavation.*

**Images and captions**

## 6 Sending a Press Release

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Now that you have a press release you need to send it. You could use a news service like [NEWSWIRE](#), a website that lets people publish their press release, or you can send it to individual news organisations— especially important for local or specialist stories. Remember, news services send out thousands of press releases daily and not all organisations subscribe to them.

### 6.1 Format

Don't send the press release text as an attachment, but paste the entire press release into the body of the email. Attachments tend to have issues.

Compress your images. Host your high resolution images elsewhere, such as in a dropbox folder (*open to everyone*) or your website, and include a link to them with explanatory text, such as 'high resolution images available here.' You want some good visuals to catch their eye but not crash the email server – most news organisations limit the size of emails they can receive to 5-10 MB.

You only have a handful of words in the subject line to grab journalists' attention and if the first two are 'Press release: ...' chances are you are not going to get picked. Keep it simple by using the title of your press release.

### 6.2 Publishers List

Make a list of people or organisations that publish stories like the one you are pitching— these are the people you will send your press release to. For example, [David Keys at the Independent](#) or [Maeve Kennedy at the Guardian](#) both publish archaeology related stories. Alternatively, you can use the generic email address that deals with archaeology (often the Science or Culture desks). It takes only a few hours to gather the required contact information, which should be updated once a year, if possible.

### 6.3 Finding the Right Person

If you are not sure who to send the press release to call the organisation and ask. Do not call reporters directly, unless you are on first name terms and have built up a relationship with them. Explain you have a topic for an article about archaeology— remember that reception does not want to hear the whole story, just enough to be able to give you the correct reporter's contact details.

### 6.4 Timing

It is important to time when you send your press release. Each day a reporter will sift through a large number of press releases and tips for potential stories ('leads'). Even an eye-catching headline and good lead paragraph will not always be selected for publication, as even the best story can get lost in the flood of press releases or be overtaken by other news.

Remembering the news process is essential for selecting appropriate time for sending you press release to journalists. You want to send it to them when they are looking for leads— **before** meeting with their editors and **after** publication deadlines. Sending it when they are already busy often

working on several articles and or prior to publication deadlines is not a good time, as your email will likely be ignored.

If you don't know when is the most suitable time to send your press release, call the reception desk (of particular news organisation) and ask about the timing of their deadlines. **DO NOT CALL REPORTERS!** (they are busy)

### 6.5 Best Day?

Be aware of important dates. You could have the most amazing discovery but if you put out your press release the day of the World Cup Final there is no way you will make the news. Often your news can wait– it may already have waited centuries to be told anyway.

Before putting out a press release, check the calendar for big local, national or international events.

### 6.6 Be available

Whoever is listed as your contact person needs to be available. **DO NOT** send out a press release and then go on holiday if you are the contact person.

If your article goes international, the contact person needs to be reachable in the days after the release goes out– maybe up to a week or more.

### 6.7 Publicise

Not everyone interested in your project/event/discovery will read the '*Local Daily*'. Share your work in your social networks. If '*Local Daily*' see new/increased traffic to their website targeting your article, they are likely to publish your work again.

## 7 What to Expect

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With the high pressure on journalists to produce lots of articles in a short amount of time, do not be surprised if parts of the press release are cut and pasted straight into an article – why press releases are structured like news articles. Often journalists and editors might carry out some light editing or occasionally some heavy one, depending on specific circumstances. Do not get angry if they change your wording or cut out entire sections. You have given them the raw materials to work with and by supplying the press release in writing you will hopefully avoid potential miscommunications (although errors may still occur).

You can do everything right and still not get any interest in your press release. Archaeology, while important to us, often takes a back seat to other types of news. Sometime an already written and ready to be published article will be discarded because a celebrity does something. This is just life - so don't take it personally.

## 8 Press Release Tips

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- Prepare your press release with an audience in mind.
- Try and steer clear of hyperbole, such as 'breakthrough', 'unique', 'state-of-the-art' etc. You will have laughed at others using these phrases, so don't do it yourself!
- Always write from a journalist's perspective. Never use **I** or **WE** unless it is in a quote and state facts only.
- Shorter is better; so if you can say it in two pages, then great, BUT if you can say it in one page, then even better.
- Read it over, read it out loud, get someone else to read it.
- Never sound as if you are trying to sell the reader something.
- Always sound as if you are trying to inform the reader of something.
- Submit images with your press release or a dropbox link with captions.
- Avoid excessive use of bolding and uppercase text.
- Always spell-check your press release before submitting.
- Include action-items for the readers– for example, if you are describing the release of your new book, include the ISBN number and the URL of a website where it can be purchased. If you are having an open day, then tell people where and when.
- Always place a hyperlink to the press release on your website for better search engine optimization and visibility.
- ALWAYS check that your hyperlinks work.

If you have any questions about press releases or want some help with media, you can contact Doug at [docks.macqueen@gmail.com](mailto:docks.macqueen@gmail.com) who will do his best to help.