

The changing role of science press officers

Focus groups with academics

Research report for Science Media Centre

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Contents

Introduction	4
Summary of findings	5
Experiences of communicating with the news media	7
Assessments of communicating with the news media	7
Experience of communicating broader research	9
Importance of communicating with the news media	10
Importance for the university	10
Importance for their research area	11
Importance compared with other media types	12
University support, encouragement and training	14
Support available	14
Training provided	16
Encouragement	16
The future	18
Appendix – recruitment quotas	19

Introduction

Ipsos was commissioned by the Science Media Centre (SMC) to conduct qualitative research into attitudes towards engaging with the news media on science and research among university-based researchers and academics. The aim of this study has been to investigate current perceptions and expectations of the role of science press and research communication officers among academics. This includes the extent to which researchers feel they are supported by the teams, whether perceptions of support have changed over time, and how important they feel this support is to their engagement with news media.

This report summarises the key findings from three two-hour online focus groups conducted with 17 university-based researchers and academics between 24 May and 9 June 2022. Participants were recruited from universities and research institutes from across the UK; Ipsos sourced some of the contacts while others were recruited through the Science Media Centre's contacts.

Participants were recruited according to three main quotas. These are outlined below and detailed in an attached appendix:

- One quota was focussed on twelve **topic areas** considered to be of particular public interest, including nuclear power, statins, genome editing and climate change.
- Another controlled the type of **institution** the academic was based in, ensuring representation across “golden triangle” institutions, the wider Russell Group, and other universities in the UK
- The third quota was on level of **media experience**: participants were screened to ensure that some had a great deal of news media experience while others had less (with the exception of the junior group).

The focus groups were organised by seniority to ensure participants had similar levels of experience in academia and to prevent more junior participants being influenced by senior stakeholders. The definition for each group is provided below:

- **Early career**: Including PhD students, post-doctorate researchers and research associates
- **Mid-career**: More-established researchers often leading a small research group, at Doctor or Associate Professor level
- **Senior**: Recruited from among Professors who are department heads and large research group leads

This report details the findings of qualitative research. Qualitative research is intended to show the range of opinions that exist among the selected group of researchers and academics. The views expressed in this document cannot be extrapolated to represent the weight of opinion among researchers and academics generally.

Summary of findings

Openness to engaging with media among academics has increased since the early 2000s

Among more senior participants, who were at an earlier stage in their career twenty years ago, it was felt that researchers today valued speaking with the news media more and were less likely to consider it wasted time than they did then.

These senior participants also felt that the media had become better at talking about science since the 2000s. Many of their examples of especially poor reporting by the news media dated from tabloid newspapers during that period and they were not aware of similar issues more recently. They also felt that news media journalists were better informed today than twenty years ago.

However, these views were not as strongly held among junior and mid-level researchers, suggesting that a perception bias is in play: the most senior academics are more likely to be approached by more senior and better-informed media organisations, and are also more confident to push back against inaccurate reporting. More junior groups were often more hesitant to engage as they worried about their research being over-simplified and the comparatively fast-paced nature of most media engagement.

There is a perception that universities offer reactive or limited support for news media engagement

Engaging with news media was often seen as a matter of personal motivation rather than being supported by institutions. While researchers acknowledged that not all research areas (and not all academics) are suitable for the news media, they felt that support from universities to speak with to journalists tended to be reactive and based on academics approaching the press office – and in some cases support was simply unavailable. For instance, there was a common perception that the press office might not support researchers who were misrepresented or misquoted in the media (and some had first-hand experience of this).

The perception of reactive support was in part due to the nature of academic publishing: researchers and journals tend to lead on publishing papers, so if one attracts media attention, the university will only find out when it hits the news, or if the academic in question gets in touch. Yet some researchers gave different reasons for limited support from university press offices – in some cases they knew the team was small and overstretched, others felt that the lack of support was due to poor understanding of their research.

Awareness of the support offered by university press offices varied widely by institution, likely reflecting both the level of support on offer and the extent of familiarity or experience each researcher had with their university. Generally, awareness of the support on offer was lower among more senior academics, who felt more confident in their ability to speak with journalists and tended to work with the media directly. However senior researchers who were more aware of the level of support offered tended to have the strongest opinions, including some who were the most critical.

The benefits of engagement with news media are not clear to all researchers

There was a widespread perception that informing the public about scientific advances was important, based on the need to build the reputation of science and show return on taxpayer investment in research funding. The concept of showing money at work was even more important to charity funders who derive their resources in part from donations from the public.

Yet not all researchers felt that this engagement was personally beneficial to their careers, and those who did tended to place this behind other considerations. There were very mixed experiences of dealing with news media among the mid-level researchers which led some of them to say they had actively avoided media engagement opportunities.

Researchers also saw that engagement with the news media brings clear benefits for their universities and funders. For universities, the benefits were reputational and financial: including attracting new students and securing a better rating in the Research Excellence Framework (REF) exercise, to gain greater levels of UKRI funding. Funders were seen to be keen to build their reputations, especially charitable funders.

Across the groups, some researchers felt there was the potential for a mismatch between the reasons driving individual scientists to engage with the news media and the reasons their institutions chose to do so. Often the incentives for researchers and their institutions were aligned. However, where universities were more interested in media coverage to build reputation, researchers felt that support to communicate important but less topical science with the public tended to be less effective.

Early career experiences are very different

Early career researchers felt that they had very limited opportunities for engagement with news media. The main reason cited in the group was opposition from line or lab managers that they do anything except focus on their 'day job' – and the general pressure to conduct research and publish papers in order to build a career in academia.

Many were interested in public engagement and outreach (for instance, recording podcasts) but felt they had very little time to commit at this stage in their careers. Perhaps as a result, recruitment for this focus group proved to be the most challenging of the three.

Most academics do want more support to engage with media in future

Aside from the most senior academics, participants were open to getting greater support in their engagement with news media. Both mid- and early-stage academics were interested in having more support in dealing with the media and the junior group were particularly interested in getting opportunities for media engagement. These two groups were also interested in having greater media-related training and only a minority had been able to access it through their universities. It was also felt that funders and journals could offer more support in preparing researchers for news media attention.

Further, some academics felt that media training was more accessible (and sometimes provided more effectively) through external organisations such as Royal Colleges, PR and media firms and the SMC itself. Many of the senior academics were aware and had first-hand experience of the work of SMC and others in promoting engagement with news media and felt this was a vital support to public engagement with science. However, they were unclear on whether a dividing line exists between the type of training and support offered by organisations like the SMC and that which should be offered by their institution.

Experiences of communicating with the news media

Personal experiences

The level of personal experience in dealing with the news media varied across the groups. Most mid-career and all senior academics had at least some exposure, while the early career group generally had very little experience. Those who had experience in this group had done so through events organised by the SMC.

While early career participants had the least experience, they often had tangential exposure to dealing with news media as their Principal Investigator or lab leader might have done interviews on papers they had contributed to. Among the very junior, the lack of a doctorate was seen as a big impediment to being listened to by news media:

“I realised that having a PhD behind your name really helps... being able to say ‘Dr Somebody’ carries a lot of weight, and I was giving input and writing comments and stuff, and then not necessarily getting quoted.” **Early career academic**

For the mid-career group, engagement with the news media often felt irregular and sporadic, tied to the publication of specific papers. Some of the academics in the group worked in fields related to the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. vaccines, epidemiology) and had seen an exponential growth in demands for media engagement over the past two years. With public attention on the pandemic subsiding, they felt that their media engagement experiences would return to the more intermittent status quo from 2019.

“[My communication with the media] is very bitty... It's been a lot for the last sort of two years, but it's really tapered off over the last sort of few months as the pandemic's ‘over’.” **Mid-level academic**

Senior academics had a different experience, with their engagement with the media feeling fairly regular and having increased over time. As senior people in their field they felt that they were likely to continue to be contacted, often having established relationships with journalists. For some, their concern was on making sure some of these opportunities are passed on to others in their teams.

“You get repeat business. People come back to you. So, you talk to somebody and they keep a good database, and three years later they come back.” **Senior academic**

Assessments of communicating with the news media

Participants had mixed views of how they felt about dealing with the news media. Senior academics were broadly positive about experience of communicating with journalists and enjoyed the challenge of compressing their research areas into news-worthy summaries. Looking back over their careers, they felt that stories about their research had been balanced and fair, with improvements since the tabloid culture of the early 2000s.

“I don't see some of the really weird headlines that you see in the tabloids anymore. A colleague of mine worked on depression and identified a gene that is a predisposition for depression. It turns out this gene has been present since the dinosaurs. So they were interviewed by the Daily Mail and they told them about the gene, and the front page was ‘T Rex had depression’.” **Senior academic**

The senior group could all name examples of negative experiences with the news media, but they tended to attribute these to their own actions rather than to the journalists they engaged with. They recognised journalists might be working outside of their areas of expertise when covering science and saw it as their job to ensure they talked about their research in a way that journalists and the public can understand.

“I was misquoted, and it led to a lot of confusion and led to a bit of reputational damage, which I recovered from but I learned a lesson that the media, you've really got to pitch it at a very, very basic level.” **Senior academic**

“You're trying to always distil it down so your Mum could understand it, I suppose. I often think of... explaining it to my Mum, as maybe my sort of model listener. If I could do that then I'd be doing my job.” **Senior academic**

Mid-career academics had far more mixed personal experiences of communicating with the news media. While all could think of positive experiences these were tempered by negatives which made them more wary of engaging with news media. They were concerned that the meaning of their research would be lost in the search for a headline, and worried about the rapid media timelines which made it harder to get the core message of their research across.

“Media coverage was extensive over [my research], really extensive. Completely, really hard to handle... I've probably stayed away a little bit off the back of that experience.” **Mid-level academic**

The key drivers of their more mixed experiences with news media fell into three broad categories:

- **Different timescales:** often mid-career academics found the sense of urgency involved in communicating with the media, compared to the time spent in their research, to be a challenge
- **The need to synthesise their work:** While this was seen as an enjoyable challenge by the senior group, mid-level academics noted that boiling down their research into a form useful for journalists was a challenge in itself
- **Fear of agendas:** there was concern that some journalists might come to their research with an angle that they would find hard to defend against or explain – the group wanted to know more about the background of journalists who approach them before they committed

Additionally, some in this mid-level group worked in more contentious fields close to the pandemic response and had experienced explosive levels of attention through news and social media. Often this occurred due to the publication of a journal article or social media work by others, giving the experience an even greater feeling of being uncontrolled:

“The [research has] got misconstrued in the media and then the media responded to the misconstrued claims and had a massive go at our work... which really scared some of the other PIs, and when it came round to doing some press again, or when that work actually got sent off for publication, they refused to do any press on it, they said, 'We're not going anywhere near it after that.'” **Mid-level academic**

“One of our colleagues, he has a Twitter account, so there were 6,000 [responses]... he said that you have to reply... some things were unrelated with what we talked about, and then it becomes... very difficult to answer... Then once BBC Radio 4 approached, I just said, 'I'm not free on that day.'” **Mid-level academic**

Although early career academics had the least experience, some had gained experience of talking to the news media through the pandemic and they reported similar experiences.

“At the start of the COVID pandemic... was kind of a real time for epidemiologists, statisticians, anybody with a population-health background... But I quite quickly, to be honest, burnt out a little bit, found it quite stressful working so rapidly on everything at the beginning of the pandemic, and also trying to quickly field questions or comments or bits of reviews for the media that, since then I really have disengaged from a lot of it for the time being.” **Early career academic**

Experience of communicating broader research

Across the groups, participants had experience of talking with news media about other researchers' discoveries and papers. This was especially important for researchers in some topic areas such as climate change, as well as those working in fields like statistics.

“I'm a statistician in my research so I don't normally have much to say that anybody would be very interested in on my own research, but it's often more interacting to help journalists make sense of stories... I've spoken on the radio a couple of times again more linked to just interpretation of statistics rather than my own research.” **Early career academic**

This was an important avenue for early career academics who were usually less able to discuss findings from their own research as that tended to be handled by more senior staff – although this was only the case for those who put themselves forward to comment on news stories through schemes run by SMC and others. For mid-career academics, talking with new media about others' research was seen as an efficient way to gain experience as it didn't rely on their own timeline of paper production.

“One big difference is that, in terms of time versus coverage, it's much, much more efficient, because, if journalists comes to you to comment on something that's happening, it's completely the opposite of you having to create the interest in the first place.” **Mid-level academic**

However, at both levels, participants expressed similar reservations to those they felt when talking about their own research, but heightened by feeling that they weren't sufficiently expert in the research they were talking about. Firstly, they were concerned that they might not fully understand the research that was carried out and make a mistake. Secondly, there was the concern that without a better understanding of the specific research they might be more susceptible to making a mistake if they encountered a journalist who came at the story with a specific angle or opinion.

By contrast, senior academics were less likely to feel the first concern and felt better able to cope with the second. Many had experience of talking more broadly about their sector, occasionally to hostile interviewers. They also talked about their contributions to longer-form articles as well as radio and TV documentaries, where two hours' worth of recorded content might be whittled down to 5 minutes or less.

“If it's TV stuff, you just don't know what they're going to use. I was recorded for two hours for a documentary and only five minutes was included... They're looking for that cliché sound that they can then use as their marketing piece.” **Senior academic**

Importance of communicating with the news media

Across the focus groups participants primarily felt it was important to talk with the news media as part of a broad goal of communicating science and building trust with the public. Senior academics felt that the importance of this goal had increased significantly over their careers – when they started out they felt it was common to find scientists who saw no point to public engagement, but now this was much more unusual. However, there was less agreement on how beneficial engaging with the news media was for a research career.

“Scientists should be talking to the media and they should be talking and telling the public what it is we do, why we do it, why it's important and why they should care about it. Particularly as it's taxpayers' money” **Senior academic**

I used to be asked, 'I've been phoned up by this journalist. Should I speak to them?' 15 years ago, say, and I always used to say, 'Yes. We're public funded researchers, you want to get your message out there.' Nobody ever asks me that now. **Senior academic**

Academics also agreed that communicating with the media was important for their institution, but for different reasons. Relatively few felt their university's aim was to build trust in science among the public; instead they thought their institution was interested for financial reasons. Building reputation by being associated with research breakthroughs would drive revenue by attracting more students and would also increase the level of grant funding available through mechanisms such as the Research Excellence Framework. Additionally, some universities had specifically local aims to improve their standing in their home areas, which would bring benefits such as helping with recruitment and aiding planning permission applications.

As a result, researchers felt there was the potential for a mismatch between the incentives driving individual researchers and their institutions to speak with the news media. Often incentives were aligned and researchers felt supported – but where there was misalignment academics often felt that communication of science with the public could suffer.

Importance for the university

Across all groups academics felt that communicating with the media had strategic importance for their institution, as a way to advertise to potential students and build their brand on the local, national and international stage. They felt that their institutions were keen to improve their general standing in the national arena but also in their local area (especially for those based in smaller towns and regions).

Among senior academics there was also a feeling that news media engagement (and public engagement more generally) had become more important since they began working in academia in previous decades.

“[The university] puts a lot more effort into communicating with the media now than it did when I started doing it 20 years ago, it's of more importance to the organisation.” **Senior academic**

“In [university town] we now also have ‘civic university’ status, so the idea is that as well as trying to deal with more global challenges you’re also trying to do things that bring more direct and immediate benefit to the local community. If you’re trying to recruit people in for studies, you’re trying to engage people, or you just want to build another building in their backyard that has a university badge on it, then it’s nice that they have a slightly warmer feeling towards you.” **Mid-level academic**

Overall, academics felt the most important objective for their universities was to show the institution in a way that would help recruit more students in the future. Some felt universities were focussing on this too much, which could have a detrimental impact on their ability to communicate science. This revealed a mismatch between the objectives of the universities and those of the academics.

“The drivers behind what the university are interested in are really about maximising publicity for different reasons, students, staff, fundraising, and so on. That is the fundamental problem with the whole issue of communicating science, is that often those producing the press releases, and the news media reporting the stories, their primary goal is not educating the public better.” **Senior academic**

Importance for their research area

Overall academics felt it was important to engage with the news media as part of a wider goal of communicating science and building trust with the public. Further, they tended to agree that speaking with the news media is important for their area of research. This was especially true for academics working in more controversial areas including nuclear power, vaccines and climate change, as well as for those working on health-related research where organ donations are important.

Moreover, many felt that the importance of communicating with the public for their sector had increased in recent years. Often this was driven by events including the pandemic and well-publicised scandals or failings that had damaged the reputation of their sector.

“I think there’s an increasing recognition by climate scientists that we need to go out there and engage and tell people what’s going on, because the situation is quite potentially catastrophic in the next 50 to 100 years.” **Senior academic**

“When Fukushima happened that was a complete disaster for the nuclear industry worldwide. But in the UK... We got the right people in front of the cameras saying sensible things about the issues. You do struggle to get your message across. But the UK and its public acceptance of nuclear has been pretty solid because people have communicated sensibly about the issues associated with nuclear power and the benefits of radio-nuclearising medicine.” **Senior academic**

“Yes, particularly we [use media engagement to] get people to donate. In our consortium there’s a brain donation bank so, there’s a big encouragement to try and get that message out, so that people will donate their brains, and how you can be involved in research, and to kind of push research forwards and the benefits of that.” **Early career academic**

Importance for their career

The groups tended to think that news media engagement carried least weight when it came to their own careers. Senior academics were most likely to think that it would be a benefit for researchers today – but tended to contrast this with less positive experiences earlier in their own careers.

“I was often criticised for being in the media in my middle-ranking years. As senior lecturer I was told I wanted to be a television presenter and not an academic, it was a lot of that kind of thing. I think the mood has changed [more recently].” **Senior academic**

“I think there's much more encouragement to [engage with media now]. It seems to be in the promotion criteria, I don't know if that's for all other universities... Also the funders are very big on it, that you communicate your findings.” **Senior academic**

Mid-level researchers were less likely to think there was a direct career benefit to engaging with news media, but they saw it as a good thing in itself and also something that might appeal to funders.

“I'm not fussed for my career's sake. I don't want fame and fortune. I'd rather change things. That's what I'm in it for. From that perspective, no, but from a funding perspective, yes, I think it probably does count. I think funders are aware of people that have high profile and are influencers, and there definitely is a tendency, I think at least, for funding to go to those people who attract attention.” **Mid-level academic**

“One of the biggest challenges is how to enable supervisors to really appreciate what's of true value to PhD students [as well as postdoc researchers] at different points in their progression... It's really important, and valid, that they feel confident to work in different spaces, and communicate in different ways. But, if it's not perceived as valued by the student because of the reaction of the supervisor, they won't engage with it, and I think that could, then, be disadvantageous to them later on.” **Mid-level academic**

By contrast, the view among early career researchers was that there was very little career benefit to engaging with news media. They often felt that other demands, like finding funding, continuing lab work and publishing papers took precedence at this point in their careers and that later they might turn their attention to the media. Further, many felt that their line managers or supervisors would take a dim view of them focussing on something like media engagement, which was considered outside of their “day job”.

“So, I think, definitely, for maybe like your first and second post-doc, there really isn't any time. [Line managers will say] 'No, no, if you want to stay in academia, you need to focus on getting enough papers to write a fellowship grant. And anything that takes your focus away from that is not going to help you in your future career, so don't do it'.” **Early career academic**

“I don't know how much weight stuff like this carries. When you're applying for a fellowship, you've got your proposal... and media doesn't really come into it.” **Early career academic**

Importance compared with other media types

Throughout the workshops the academics spoke about different methods of engaging with the public about science and the participants had a wide range of experiences, including appearing in TV documentaries, running patient forums and outreach events, using social media and contributing to blogs and podcasts.

Overall, researchers felt that news media remained an important avenue for publicising and talking about scientific information, although they acknowledged that now there are many other ways to speak with the public. Some (especially parents) noted that traditional TV and radio news formats were being consumed far less by young people today and wondered about what this would mean for the future.

Although they knew news media was probably the most important outlet for communicating science, it was not usually the preferred way for academics to discuss their findings. Mid- and early career researchers in particular tended to find longer-form blog posts and podcasts to be the most enjoyable way to talk about their research. These formats gave them the space to talk about their research in the level of detail they felt it deserved and appeared to be consumed by a smaller but more informed audience. Additionally, these formats are self-published so can be used by those who don't have media-worthy papers coming out in the immediate future.

“So, in terms of the communication... a podcast is kind of self-driven... Whereas the press office is like, 'This result was published.' I got the impression that it really has to be published. You can't just waltz in and discuss what you're generally researching if you don't have a hard fact behind it or a hard result behind it.” **Early career academic**

“Sometimes, for example, papers or things that attract a lot of attention we'll make a podcast... we have that facility to be able to do that ourselves and these things get looked at quite a lot, thousands of times, sometimes. Again, they're not reaching the audience that [news media] are, but, obviously, they're more thoughtful pieces, and it's engaging.” **Senior academic**

Some also used social media – the senior academics were most comfortable doing this as they tended to be more established names in their sector, but it was used across levels of seniority. There was also recognition that social media could offer a rapid way to communicate with a lot of people. Often however academics used Twitter to speak with people in their sector rather than to communicate with the wider public.

“The other thing with social media is you are piggy backing off somebody who has got a following. The stuff I did with the BBC for their Facebook page, if I had put it on my Facebook page half a dozen of my friends would have possibly looked at it, but if it goes on the BBC's Facebook page, then it'll probably be looked at by a large number of people.” **Senior academic**

“... in terms of following people and then being able to have bits of conversation about very specific things, it's really useful because it can be so instantaneous and you can actually have quite useful connections quite quickly.” **Mid-level academic**

But while early and mid-level academics were comfortable using social media to communicate about their research, there was a general agreement that mainstream news media remained the channel with the greatest reach. Academics across groups felt their research would have much greater visibility through traditional media channels.

“...things like Twitter, Facebook or TikTok, very few of the public see. There are a handful of scientists who get these massive followings, and they clearly have influence, but as a general method it's hard... So, it does feel that actually the best way is through more formal media outlets, and clearly television and radio and newspapers are a very strong way of doing that.” **Senior academic**

“I think [social media is] very time-consuming, and it feels much easier just to be quoted in a BBC news article, or Daily Mail, Mail Online, because these are avenues that already exist, and they will also be amplified through all of those channels anyway.” **Mid-level academic**

University support, encouragement and training

Perceptions of the level of support, encouragement and training offered by universities around news media varied widely. It was clear that some universities offered more than others, but also that few were fully aware of the level of support their institution offered. The most junior researchers tended not to think the training available was for their level, while both mid-level and senior academics were either unaware of what training was on offer, or felt it was for less experienced academics.

Many in the workshops had experience of receiving training or support from other institutions, including the Science Media Centre as well as funders and other organisations. They were typically very complimentary about this training and felt more should be available.

Support available

Not all academics were aware of their university press or communications offices, and there were varied perceptions on whether these organisations would be supportive if they got in touch. Among those who had contacted their press office there were many positive examples of support, for instance in drafting press releases. This was true for those in larger institutions as well as smaller ones:

“My impression... is that they would be very supportive. They were saying, 'We'll bring you through every stage of it if you have something of interest. Or if they approach you or you want to get yours out. We'll support you from either end if you want. If you're nervous about doing live interviews, we can do mock ones of those. We'll read or write your press report'.”
Early career academic

“We've got a university press office, they're a good team. We're a very small university, and we tend to know the people we're working with. So, I think the support they provide is relatively informal in the sense that I'm sure they do all the different things, but the reality is you go and have a chat with them.” **Mid-level academic**

Further examples of support came through the pandemic – one early career researcher was offered additional support from their university when their name was made public through work with the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“When lists were made public as to who was part of subgroups of SAGE... I remember when that happened, we got an email from the Press Office to those who were on one of these subgroups to say, 'If you do support with your work and outreach then we're here and that's our job to help you with that,' which was good.” **Early career academic**

Some at larger universities felt the press office was not always easy to approach as they have limited time and work across multiple research areas. Whilst some academics said they could approach the press office when they were looking to gain media attraction for new research, others felt it would be more difficult to go to the press office with a fast-turnaround media engagement requirement.

“We do have a press team who we can contact if it's about publications, or about press releases, and they are good at getting back to you, but I do find sometimes, they're quite a small team. It's quite a large university, and I guess they're dealing with lots of different potential publications and press releases, from lots of different areas of research across the university.” **Senior academic**

Academics who had worked at multiple institutions recently were able to note differences in approach between the press teams at different universities. The largest, internationally facing universities tended to have the largest press teams that offered higher levels of in-house support. Smaller universities were often as supportive but had fewer staff and so were unable to offer as much support or training, although they often found external providers to help. However, examples were given of universities of all sizes providing support for news media engagement.

“[University] has a good communications department. They help with the press releases. They will either draft it after interviewing you or I do it and they make some changes and release that. They don't offer training per se, but there are courses that they recommend that we can go on.” **Senior academic**

Often senior and mid-level academics felt their press teams provided support reactively – there were no examples provided of instances where a press officer had approached a researcher to find out what they had coming out. However, they understood that it would be difficult for a press team to know everything that was going on in a given university and were comfortable coming to the office if they needed it.

“We do have a press team who we can contact if it's about publications, or about press releases, and they are good at getting back to you, but I do find sometimes, they're quite a small team. It's quite a large university, and I guess they're dealing with lots of different potential publications and press releases, from lots of different areas of research across the university. So, I think their time is really stretched as well.” **Senior academic**

Early career researchers had less experience of working with press offices, but they too felt that they would be supportive of attempts to speak with the news media. More often, at their level, they felt that the structures of academia and attitudes of their direct superiors were a bigger block to seeking more opportunities to speak with the news media.

“I get the sense that [the press office] would be there to be very supportive, although I haven't interacted with them [here]... It doesn't feel like it's lack of support from press office, but more lack of support from the community and the structures in academia that could be there to sort of help push you in that direction.” **Early career academic**

Generally, but not always, it was felt that the university press office would help researchers to deal with the outcome of an interview that went wrong, for instance if they were misquoted. This support was thought to be most available in cases where a simple correction was required, although some felt that their university might lack the authority to change the behaviour of national news sources.

Academics also felt that in the case of misquoting or sensationalist coverage of their research the damage is done at the point of initial publication, so a correction or retraction wouldn't undo much of the reputational or professional damage. Further, in some more complicated cases they felt the press office was less able to provide support:

“But the thing is, it didn't quote me wrongly, but the article was wrong. I was the counter argument saying ‘this is rubbish’, but 90% of the text is something really appalling and I'm on the page which I'm not happy with. So I think there's some stuff that isn't fixable. [University] press office is not going to get the Daily Mail to change their website, maybe [a press office at a big university] could.” **Mid-level academic**

In another example, the changing nature of scientific publishing exposed some shortcomings in the support offered by universities and press offices. In this case, the news media had been drawn to controversial findings in a pre-print journal and was publishing stories based on the findings. The university had a policy of not commenting on any pre-print results as these are not fully peer-reviewed,

so the researchers were unable to defend the inaccurate reading of their results in the media and the press office offered no support.

“We put out a pre-print... and that got picked up by the media and completely misrepresented, but we were told by our university press team that the policy following their guidelines was not to do press for pre-prints. And so we ended up in a situation where our work was being really badly misconstrued all across the media, and we weren't able to get out there and correct it at all.” **Mid-level academic**

Training provided

Awareness of available media training was mixed. This reflected different levels of provision at different universities, but also the level of engagement the academics had with their press offices. More senior academics who had been in place for some time tended to have had limited recent interactions with their press office: they would have done media training some years ago and now tended to handle media relations themselves.

“I haven't felt the need for that support. If I wanted it, if I contacted the press office, or the media office, or whatever they call themselves nowadays, they may well provide support, but I just don't know because I've never felt the need for it.” **Senior academic**

“Both [previous and current universities] are very good at media training. They offer courses and training to postdocs and academics. I remember I did my media training about 15 years ago through the Royal Society... They had someone giving you a tough time and then someone being pleasant. You got a feel for the difficult questions you might get.” **Senior academic**

Mid-level academics were in a similar position, with longer-established academics less aware of the training on offer from their universities. Most had done some media training earlier in their career and felt that it was a really useful experience. In common with senior academics, they felt that it was useful to do once, and after that they could be self-sufficient.

“I couldn't swear blind that they don't run courses. It's possible they run courses and I've just not noticed them, but there's nothing really particularly formal that I'm aware of. As I say, I did a little bit as part of some other course a few years, many years ago now, but there's not a huge amount.” **Mid-level academic**

“I did media training when I was doing my PhD, which still stands me in good stead, I still remember things from that. So, I think that's an essential thing, if people aren't getting that, that's a mistake. Even for general communication, all the skills are relevant.” **Mid-level academic**

Among the junior researchers there was awareness that their press office was helpful and offered media training, but none of those in the group had taken part. In part this was seen as an issue tied to the pandemic, but also the theme of not being able to put aside time to seek training was raised.

“I think at time [of my first interviews] I hadn't done any media training at all... And then with the pandemic, I've still not done any media training.” **Early career academic**

Encouragement

Senior academics said that the level of encouragement offered by university press teams had increased over recent decades. Drawing contrasts with their own early careers, they felt that the level of encouragement to speak with the news media from universities had risen. This was seen to be driven from a number of different locations, including changes in culture in academia and research funding.

They also felt that the emergence of social media and a proliferation of media formats meant younger researchers were more open to being on camera than previous generations.

“There's more encouragement than there was 20 years ago, for a variety of reasons, so I think that's definitely changed, yes.” **Senior academic**

“I think universities are very supportive of the younger people coming through and the expectation is that they are media savvy, and they are encouraged to train them to be so.” **Senior academic**

Most of the participants saw engagement with the news media as being researcher-led. Although they felt that their university press teams were supportive and would help with training and preparing press releases when asked, they did not expect more proactive encouragement from the press office. They understood that press offices had to focus their attentions and could not encourage or support everyone equally.

“I think with [one] issue, there were some difficulties with the big chemical companies that were involved in the research. I know that the press office helped, I don't know exactly, because it wasn't me on that project, but I know that they did provide support to the scientists who were putting out a message which was difficult for the funders of the research. But yes, we have 2 or 3 people representing maybe 400 scientists, so they're limited, but they are there for the biggies.” **Mid-level academic**

This also fed a perception for some that the university press teams would focus their support and encouragement on research that would provide the biggest reputational return (or posed the biggest threat) for the institution.

“Everybody was very keen to promote [my area of research] 15 years ago, but less so now, because things move on... My impression is that they're less interested in the stuff that I send them, over recent years, than they used to be, but I'm saying that's just a reflection of me not doing such interesting research anymore.” **Senior academic**

The future

Senior and mid-level academics felt that the importance of public engagement with science would continue to grow in the future. This was not considered as solely a pandemic impact – reflecting on their own experiences, senior academics felt there had been a big shift in emphasis over the last few decades towards greater engagement with the public and they felt that this trend would continue. Yet while the importance of engagement with the news media was anticipated to grow, there was a sense that its relative importance to other methods of outreach, especially social media, blogs and podcasts, would decrease.

Some saw structural reasons pre-dating the pandemic driving much of this change. For instance, the amount of weight given to public and media engagement in Research Excellence Framework (REF) assessments was called out as a particularly important driver of the volume of engagement increasing over the past decade.

“In 2014's REF, [public impact] was not important. In 2021's REF, it was a lot more important. If you look at the number of academics from different universities getting engaged in media activities, it has increased from 2014 to 2021... We will see the same cycle start in 2025, 2026 onwards.” **Mid-level academic**

Against this backdrop of rising importance in communicating science, the past two years of the pandemic were considered to be an important waypoint – not just for those whose research areas were directly related to COVID-19. While some expected that public interest in science might fall in the coming few years, others hoped it had helped to improve the standing of science in public debate more generally:

“I think one of the positives of the COVID pandemic has been that science, and debates around science, have been much more to the fore and that may actually have a long-term effect of people having a better appreciation of the fact that science isn't about facts, often it's about opinions and judging the evidence, which may not all point in the same direction.” **Senior academic**

“The importance of science and communicating it has been illustrated to us over the past few years in quite dramatic fashion with the pandemic and climate change. We've got the war in Ukraine and all its implications. Communicating science in a succinct and clear manner is only going to become more and more important. We do have to make sure we build on the very positive things that have happened.” **Senior academic**

Despite seeing an increasing role for communicating science with the public, outside of the senior academics the general view was that there would be a decrease in the extent of researchers' involvement in news media engagement.

Early career academics had little experience and did not expect this to increase until they had become much more established. Among mid-level academics, some had consciously stepped back from doing media engagement after bad experiences or hoped for less due to a feeling of burnout over the pandemic. Others felt that their level of media engagement would be dependent on press interest in the papers they would be publishing.

“I'm hoping less, because most of the media work that I've done in the last 2 years has been related to COVID-19 and the pandemic... There is a [non-covid] research project I'm involved in, which I would love to have some public awareness of, because I think it's terribly important... but I haven't got the faintest idea how to do that.” **Mid-level academic**

Appendix – recruitment quotas

	Seniority	Media experience	Research area	University type
Senior group	Department heads leading large research groups, may have a keynote speaker at a conference	70% significant media experience (i.e. quoted in multiple media stories over a 5 year period) 30% occasional media experience or no media experience.	A mix from across the following areas of public interest: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ e-cigarettes ▪ statins ▪ genome editing in humans, animals and crops ▪ diet and nutrition ▪ fertility ▪ climate change ▪ antidepressants/other treatments for mental illness ▪ obesity and behaviour ▪ disease epidemiology ▪ vaccine uptake/behaviour ▪ nuclear power ▪ treatment of chronic pain 	Mix of institutions. Representation from the following three categories in each group: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Golden triangle ▪ Russell Group universities ▪ Other universities
Mid group	Doctor or new Professors who lead an established research group.	70% some media experience (e.g. quoted in the newspaper/TV or radio appearance) 30% little or no media experience (but may have done other types of communications)		
Junior group	Post-doctorate researchers and associates, or PhD students.	Not expected to have media experience.		

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