



Media Guide

Working with the Public Relations team and journalists

Working with the media

Stories in the mass media have the potential to reach millions of people worldwide, shaping public opinion, encouraging debate and influencing policy.

For Queen Mary, media coverage is an effective way to amplify what we say about our teaching, research and student experience. Not only does this serve to strengthen our reputation, it often sparks interest from potential collaborators and funders who may otherwise be unaware of the valuable work going on behind our doors.

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What is this guide for?

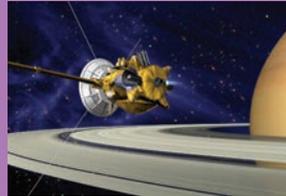
Whether it is to promote your research findings, give an expert opinion on world events, or to represent the institution as a spokesperson, you may be required to speak to journalists at some point in your career at Queen Mary.

While not definitive, this guide is designed to give you the basics of what to expect when working with the media, including tips on how to get the most out of interviews, how to write a powerful comment piece and how the PR team at Queen Mary can support you.

What makes a good news story?

For a story to appeal to journalists, it must have a clear angle. It will also contain one or more of the following elements:

- **A first or something new**
- **Human interest (will have an impact on the average person, entertains or amuses)**
- **Extremes (the tallest; the fattest; the smallest; the fastest)**
- **The 'wow' factor (unusual facts and figures)**
- **Controversy or scandal**
- **VIPs and celebrities**
- **Money**
- **Anniversary dates**
- **Striking images**



What interests the media?

Universities are often a good source of news for journalists. Subjects of potential interest include:

- **Research findings**
- **New facilities or campuses**
- **Pioneering ventures with industry**
- **Public lectures with big-name speakers**
- **Ground-breaking teaching methods**
- **Changes in education policy**
- **Student achievements and perspectives**
- **Key times in the student recruitment cycle**
- **League table results**

What does the media want from you?

Our academics are often called upon to act as expert commentators in the media; their views and analysis adding weight and balance to issues of the day. Are you the voice of authority on a topic? This can be another way to raise your public profile and build media contacts for future stories.

As an expert commentator, you may be interviewed on camera or quoted in a newspaper article. Alternatively you may be commissioned to write an opinion piece or blog post. There is an ever-increasing media thirst for academic analysis of world events and new stories.



Writing an opinion piece

Opinion pieces and blog posts are a great way to convey your expertise in a given research field. Editors are looking for strong views, fresh insights and a compellingly written argument that ignites debate. Get in touch with the PR team to discuss an idea to pitch to the media.

A winning formula for a comment piece:

- **Offer an opinion not just information**
- **Say something new; a different perspective**
- **Outline your argument at the start of your article. Use the remainder to clarify your point**
- **Back up your arguments with facts and research**
- **Write with style. You might have great ideas but dull, inarticulate prose won't be published**



Former Prime Minister Tony Blair speaks to Visiting Professor and journalist John Rentoul at the 100th meeting of the Mile End Group

Social media



Social media channels can be a great way to communicate directly with people who are interested in your research and want to hear your views. Academics are increasingly using Twitter to build their public profile, to lead and join debates and to engage with peers around the world. For more information on setting up a social media presence, and how to make the most of the channels, contact the PR team or visit our intranet pages.



Do you have a story to tell?

Get in touch with the PR team to discuss any aspect of your work, if you feel it fits any of the points on page three.

The Public Relations team is part of the Directorate of Marketing and Communications. We are responsible for media relations, corporate and crisis communications, reputation management, digital media and social media.



Each Faculty has its own dedicated Public Relations Manager (visit our 'meet the team' page on the intranet for details), who can help you to:

- **Feel confident – with a range of communications training and one-on-one support**
- **Hone the key messages you want to get across in your story**
- **Identify the best ways to reach and engage your target audiences**
- **Tell your story in a way that will catch journalists' eyes and secure coverage**
- **Build strong media contacts and develop a media profile**
- **Coordinate interviews/briefings/press conferences/PR opportunities**
- **Provide media analysis reports and copies of coverage**

Key elements of a press release

A public relations manager has the professional experience to craft a press release on your behalf and to prepare a package of supporting material to help you to secure media coverage.

A good press release should pre-empt and answer all the questions that a journalist might ask about your story. It should be written using accessible language. This shouldn't be confused with 'dumbing down' the research; complexity can still be communicated without technical terms.

Journalists and editors can receive hundreds, if not thousands, of press releases every day. To make yours stand out from the crowd it needs a strong story (think about page three), a concise and punchy headline and a compelling first paragraph that sums up all the key points.

Quotes from a person at the centre of the story provide the personal perspective that journalists are looking for. They should be incisive, short and memorable. Anecdotes and statistics can also help to put points into context. Striking photographs, videos or sound clips to send to journalists with the release increase the chances of the story being covered, particularly by online news.



Press release embargoes

An embargo is a given time and date on a press release before which the story cannot be published. This is most important for research papers in scientific journals, which often impose embargoes to fit with their own publication dates. There can be exceptions, but the vast majority of journalists stick to embargoes, and you can speak to them ahead of time to pre-prepare material.

It is especially important to give advanced notice to your PR Manager for the preparation of an embargoed release.

If a press release is issued, journalists may wish to speak to you directly for further comments or additional information. With this in mind, please be available for interviews around the time the story is published. The media frequently work to tight deadlines of a few hours, not days, and need to know you are contactable.

Is media coverage guaranteed?

Even with a strong story, coverage can't be guaranteed. The news agenda is fast-paced, and this dictates what journalists are interested in covering.

Timing is crucial and your PR Manager can advise on dates to avoid and how to connect your story to a topical issue.

News is not an exact science; it is impossible to predict the level of interest from journalists. A story that might be newsworthy one day might not get a mention the next. The best thing to do is contact your PR Manager to discuss whether a potential story is news-worthy and the best publicity approach to take.



Planning your story

The more advanced notice you give your PR Manager about a story, the more detailed the communications plan as a result.



What should you do if a journalist contacts you directly?

- Find out who they are, who they work for, details about their enquiry, what their deadline is and who else they are speaking to as part of the story
- Journalists often work to tight deadlines. If they ask you to return their call, please do so as soon as possible, ideally within the hour
- If you feel underprepared to speak off-the-cuff, and you would like to gather your thoughts, ask them to call them later, or direct them to the PR team





Preparing for a media interview

- In advance, discuss with your PR Manager what questions you might be asked. A mock interview may be helpful
- Think about the specific audience this media outlet appeals to. What would they want you to explain, or be reassured about?
- Decide on three key points to get across. They need to be punchy sound bites. Can you tell them in the time it would take to go up three floors in a lift?
- Write your key points on a postcard – not reams of notes, as you can't read off a script

The ABC rule



If you feel that a journalist is pushing you into saying something you are uncomfortable with, employ the **ABC** rule. It will enable you to:

Acknowledge the question, **B**ridge the gap between what is being asked and what you want to say, then **C**ommunicate your messages.

There are some really useful **ABC** phrases that help you to stay in control of the interview and keep to your own agenda.

For example:

“You say that, but that’s not quite right, what we feel is.....”

“I don’t know about that, but what I do know is.....”

“That is an interesting point but what I want to say is.....”

“We don’t think that’s the case, we think.....”

Speaking to print journalists

- Give quotable sound bites. How would you explain this research to a friend who has no knowledge of the subject?
- Try to use comparisons and metaphors to illustrate complex points
- Be aware of throwaway comments: everything you say could be quoted in print
- Be careful of questions that start: “So what you are saying is A, B, C.” If you answer “yes”, the journalist could quote you as directly saying “A, B, C”. Answer in your own words
- As a general rule, there is no such thing as “off the record”
- Never say “no comment” as it sounds like you have something to hide – say “I’m not the best person to ask, you should try X”



Broadcast interviews

Preparation

- What is the programme and what is the audience?
- What is the interview about and what areas will be covered?
- Is it live or pre-recorded?
- How long will the interview last?
- Is anyone else being interviewed, and if so who?
- Will you be discussing the issue with them?
- Where will the interview take place? Can they arrange transport?
- Ask your interviewer what their first question is going to be
- In a live interview get your key points out as early as possible, just in case it has to be cut short
- Make sure your phone is turned off (not just on silent) for the duration of the interview
- Be careful of statistics when you are discussing risk



When being interviewed

- Be positive, calm and relaxed
- Sound passionate and enthusiastic about your subject
- Pace yourself
- Accept a glass of water, if it is offered – it helps a nervous, dry mouth
- Avoid “ums” and “ahhs”
- When you have finished your point stop speaking. The journalist may pause to encourage you to give further information, but this could lead to you saying more than you want or need to
- Think about your audience and tailor your language accordingly
- Look at the interviewer – pay no attention to the camera



- Don't get defensive – if you get angry you look guilty and could find yourself part of the story
- Make sure you look presentable
- Don't wear anything distracting, e.g. stripes, checks, comedy tie or dangly earrings
- Avoid distracting mannerisms like waving your hands around. Place them on your thighs or in your lap
- Be patient as there are lots of different shots a TV crew will need to film to fill a few minutes of air time. Retakes may be necessary if the noise of a passing car or other background disturbances distort sound quality

Recap: key points

- Respond to journalists' enquiries or requests punctually
- Please ask the journalist or presenter to give 'Queen Mary University of London' a name check (mention) on air or in print
- If you are working on something you think could be newsworthy, contact your PR Manager to discuss publicity options





Here to help

If you would like to develop your media profile and interview skills further, please get in touch with the Public Relations team. You can find more details about how the team works, along with in depth advice about press releases, media relations, opinion piece writing, blogging and digital and social media, on our intranet pages. We also offer a range of media training courses and workshops, and guidelines for staff interested in working with the press or social media.

For further details:

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W: <http://qm-web.mc.qmul.ac.uk/publicrelations/index.html>

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