



THE

CHANGING ROLE OF SCIENCE PRESS OFFICERS

Science Media Centre
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FOREWORD



**Fiona Fox OBE, Chief Executive,
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Many have observed that UK science was one part of the national response to the COVID-19 pandemic that we can all celebrate. From the development of vaccines, to clinical trials on new treatments, to prevalence and modelling studies and the detection of new variants, the science carried out in UK universities made a major contribution to tackling the global pandemic.

Central to this success was the willingness of large numbers of scientists to engage with the news media, answering journalists' questions and clearly explaining their research. This was not an add-on for scientists with time on their hands. It was an essential part of the pandemic response. There was no point having a vaccine if people were too scared to take it, or implementing evidence-based public health measures if people wouldn't follow them.

Behind the scientists in the news were science press officers – from universities, funders, journals, and the Science Media Centre (SMC) – encouraging them to engage, providing expert advice, setting up media interviews, translating complex research into journalese, running press conferences, and pushing for corrections when things went wrong.

The behind-the-scenes nature of their work means science press officers often go unnoticed and there is little by way of public discussion of the part they play. Not surprising, then, that the dramatic changes to this role in our universities have also been overlooked.

Commissioned initially to inform internal discussions about the future direction of the SMC at 20, this project carefully examines the changing role of science press officers and provides a rare insight into an important part of the scientific endeavour.

The picture painted here is in many ways positive. The report charts how research communications has blossomed in universities over the past two decades, growing from one or two people doing it on the side into highly professional departments with many specialisms. The enlightening interviews reflect my own interactions with a group of talented experts who love telling the stories of research and are passionate about the measured and accurate reporting of science.



However, it also turns a spotlight on issues that should give us pause for thought. Dramatic changes in universities and the media landscape have resulted in research communications activities being increasingly squeezed by the long list of other communication needs in a modern university. While universities retain a strong sense of the public interest in the knowledge they generate, communicating science to the wider public audience often plays second fiddle to marketing to students and communication with key stakeholders including government, industry, and funders. Combined with a reduced focus on the mainstream news media which still reaches the wider public, these changes raise interesting and important questions about whose job it is to focus on the public understanding of science – critical at times of crisis and controversy.

At an event at the University of Oxford to mark the first anniversary of the Oxford COVID-19 vaccine, Vice-Chancellor Louise Richardson talked passionately about the way the public would view universities differently because of the pandemic: not just as places where parents send their 18-year-olds for a few years to grow up, but as the places that carried out the research that led to discoveries including the vaccines. Those universities that have consciously protected a space for science press officers will share Richardson's conclusion that research communications should be seen as central to enhancing a university's reputation.

This report is a big shout-out for the work of the unsung research communicators who are such an important part of the scientific process. It comes with a plea to the leaders of our universities and of science to ensure that changes in our media and university landscapes don't inadvertently lead to the erosion of a critical specialism. It also comes with a warning. Universities are the beating heart of UK science, and the source of information the public and policymakers turn to in a crisis or when misinformation is rife. Universities need to communicate in many ways; but if research communication is overlooked, public understanding of the defining subjects of our times – and ultimately trust in science – will suffer.

“This timely report should be a reminder to the science community that we need to value and resource the specialist role of research press officers who do so much to help scientists share their research via the media. If we don’t invest in and protect this specialism, we risk limiting the quality of scientific content and discussion in the media.”

Sir Patrick Vallance, Government Chief Scientific Adviser

“As scientists, it is part of our role and responsibility to communicate with the public via the media, but to do this well takes preparation, hard work and courage. In fact, being a scientist speaking to the media about critical high-profile issues at short notice can feel a bit like landing in an unfamiliar place without a map.

“This is where skilled science press officers have such an essential role – their advice, training and support can make a real difference to our ability to do a good media interview. They also play a vital role in coaching scientists to be more confident in the way we talk about science, including being honest about the uncertainties that are inherent in our work.

“This report suggests that the university sector needs to do more to protect and support science press officers in research institutions. We know some universities have made this a priority, but we need to see this across the board.

“Science press officers need a lot of knowledge, experience and skill to do their job, and we need to value their professionalism and make sure there is the support for their work in universities – which is why this project is so important.”

Professor Dame Anne Johnson, President, The Academy of Medical Sciences

“Science communication and expert communicators have never been more important. They turn our discoveries and our sometimes impenetrable science into stories that capture the imagination of the wider public, attract students, and disseminate what we do much more widely. This is an important report that highlights the value of science communication but also notes the pressures that those doing it face and which we all need to recognise.”

Professor Dame Nancy Rothwell, President and Vice-Chancellor, The University of Manchester

“As the newly appointed Director of LSHTM, I am hugely impressed by the wide range of activities delivered by our brilliant communications team. As someone who spent much of the pandemic explaining the findings of my research on who was at most risk of catching covid to the news media, I am acutely aware of the importance of the research press officers who helped me.”

“This report arrives at a moment in time when universities are emerging from the pandemic and assessing what we did well. It has certainly made me think differently and prompted me to reflect on how easy it can be for research comms to get neglected when universities face so many other challenges. I know my senior colleagues here and in other universities are committed to getting our scientists into the media and public domain. This report is a reminder that this commitment needs to be met by ensuring we invest in and protect the place of science press officers.”

Professor Liam Smeeh, Director, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM)

“Twenty years ago, I led a national dialogue about GM at the height of the media feeding frenzy about the dangers of this new technology. What became clear to me was that the scientists involved were convinced that this approach held real promise to help deliver safe foods with benefits for the environment. But they had failed to bring the public with them. They spoke in a different language.”

“Many things have changed, but the challenges remain the same. Science press officers in universities are absolutely critical to encouraging and facilitating the media engagement needed to achieve the public understanding and support that scientists need. As the former Vice-Chancellor of UCL, I saw the huge pressures on universities to attract funding and students and fight battles with various governments. We needed to develop the communications skills to support those demands. But I never forgot the importance of research comms at UCL, and remain convinced that the reputation of our universities is closely linked to our ability to shout loudly about our discoveries as well as meeting the public need for evidence-based expertise at times of crisis.”

“This report should be essential reading for all VCs and a wake-up call to university leaders of the importance of keeping a group of skilled press officers who are vital to ensuring public understanding of and trust in science.”

**Professor Sir Malcolm Grant, Chancellor, University of York,
& former President and Provost, UCL**



In memory of Rob Dawson, an inspiring science press officer, dedicated Chair of Stempra, and an early supporter of this project. A friend and mentor to many, Rob was a much-loved member of the science communication community. He worked hard to make a difference to the lives of others, leading by example and epitomising the virtues of the best in the job. He is greatly missed but his remarkable legacy will live on.

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In November 2021, the Science Media Centre (SMC) commissioned a review called the Changing Role of Science Press Officers (CROSP0) to examine if and how the role of UK science press officers had changed in the last twenty years. CROSP0 is part of a range of activities to mark the SMC's 20th anniversary and aims to support the development of its future strategy and provide insights for the wider sector. We want to document and understand any changes that have occurred, explore the reasons for and impacts of those changes, and highlight any opportunities or gaps that might now exist as a result. It focuses on research communications and media relations specifically in universities.

An independent science communications consultant, Dr Helen Jamison, collected the evidence presented in this report in three ways. Firstly, she conducted in-depth interviews with 41 participants: press and communications officers, and senior executives who set universities' strategic goals for communications. Secondly, she used an online survey to collect more quantitative data from a further 40 press and communications officers working across UK universities. Finally, she worked with the SMC to commission Ipsos to conduct three online focus groups with university researchers, to understand their current communications and media relations needs, and their expectations of their press and communications offices.

CROSP0 is intended as a 'snapshot' of the sector to inform future work, rather than an exhaustive exploration or academic analysis of every aspect of the issues involved.

1.1 Key findings

The themes that emerged across all aspects of the research were notably clear and consistent. While participants shared a range of views, influenced by their personal experiences and the differing circumstances at different universities, there was overall agreement on the following points.

The role of science press officers has changed. It has become more professional, the remit and responsibilities have broadened, and it requires a much wider skill set.

Participants said that the role of science press officers has changed, and that this change had accelerated in recent years. They described a 'professionalisation' of the job that meant their roles have become more strategic and proactive, and a more recognised and resourced part of the central functions at most universities.

Accordingly, the remit and responsibility of the role have expanded over time, with a significant growth in the number and type of audiences being engaged and an increased involvement in more 'corporate' issues. As the job has become more established the resources available have increased, although in some places they still don't match requirements, and in others are squeezed by competition from other functions like marketing.

All of this is reflected in the day-to-day work of press and communications officers, who now need a much more diverse skill set to do their jobs as they are forced to take a broader approach to the growing demands placed on them. For many, it also means a significant increase in the pace and pressure of the job, and for some, this constant intense level of work has become overwhelming and unsustainable.

The world has changed. The media and social media landscape are radically different, societal debate is more polarised, universities face greater financial pressure, and the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated these trends.

The drivers of change were viewed to be both external and internal. Many talked about the continually shifting media landscape, the explosion in social media and other formats, and the ever-hungry 24-hour global online news media, which are increasingly challenging to navigate.

Related to this are the 'high-stakes' and politicised nature of societal debate, which has become more hostile and in many cases is leading universities to take a more risk averse approach to communications.

The biggest internal driver of change was seen by many as financial – the 'marketisation' of universities and a move towards a more commercial world where students are seen as customers. While this change in approach has not been adopted universally, some suggested that media relations and research communications are now sometimes seen as the poor relations of marketing and recruitment, meaning they are undervalued and under-resourced as a result.

On top of everything came the COVID-19 pandemic, which has had a substantial impact in the last two years. It has accelerated the trends press and communications officers were already experiencing and the myriad ways in which their roles are changing. There have been some positive effects, such as an increase in public trust in science and improved accessibility of scientists. However, many felt there had also been missed opportunities for the sector to respond to, and a worsening of difficulties such as harassment and misinformation.

What do these changes mean? More scientists engaging with the media although barriers still exist; universities committed to sharing their research with the public but possibly not doing enough to support public trust; press officers embracing the job they love, but for some the challenges are now too much.

Participants agreed the acceptance and professionalisation of science communication has had the desired effect that many more scientists are now willing to engage with the media and are better at it. Challenges remain, however. Some felt that researchers do not have sufficient support or training from their university to take on this kind of work, and many are simply too busy themselves; others have been put off by harassment and online abuse.

At a broad level, there is a clear strategic commitment from universities to share their research with and engage the public. Yet many press officers and researchers who participated said their university did not fully meet its responsibility to improve public trust in science. In addition, several press officers felt the aspect of their work most likely to reach the general public – i.e. media relations – was being outcompeted for resources, both within their own remit and with other teams and functions. Others made the point that universities do not capitalise on their collective strength, by missing opportunities to communicate together on the scientific issues in the public eye.

It was obvious when talking to press and communications officers that many of them love their job. The rewarding nature of their work enabled some of them to look positively on the challenges it now involves. However, for others the pressures and frustrations are often too much. Many felt undervalued and unsupported, and many of those surveyed had considered leaving in the last five years. There is, at a time when their work is more demanding and more critical than ever, a very real risk of losing them and their expertise from the sector. This would be a considerable setback to the progress made over the last two decades, and an unarguable loss to the profession.

1.2 Recommendations

The following are recommendations for how some of the challenges raised in this report might be addressed by the SMC, the science community, science communicators and universities. They are based not just on the key findings and issues described, but on the proposed solutions suggested most consistently by participants.

Recommendation 1: Universities should prioritise research communications and ensure it is adequately resourced.

Universities should recognise and adequately resource the distinct remit of research communications, acknowledging its value in getting science to the public and promoting trust in science, as well as its contribution to the profile and reputation of the university.

Recommendation 2: Universities should value and invest in media relations skills within their communications teams.

Universities should invest in media relations as it is an effective way of communicating science to key audiences. They should ensure some of their research communications staff have specialist media relations expertise, support their professional development, and value their role.

Recommendation 3: The SMC should encourage universities to engage with the news media when science is in the headlines, highlighting the value and impact.

University press and communications officers provide a critical role in supporting journalists to cover science accurately, even when it might not originate in their institution. The SMC should actively highlight the value of their work to ensure the public have access to evidence-based expertise when science is in the headlines. This could include engaging with future versions of the Research Excellence Framework to ensure media relations is recognised as having impact, and collating and sharing evidence to illustrate its benefits.

Recommendation 4: The SMC should champion the role of specialist science press officers in the same way it does specialist science journalists.

The SMC should act as an advocate for specialist science press officers, similar to the way it champions specialist science journalists. This should include articulating the value skilled press officers bring to their organisation – from their role in raising its profile to giving feedback on how it is perceived externally. The SMC should describe how its own role differs from that, and why both are needed and mutually beneficial.

Recommendation 5: The science community should explore improving career development and progression opportunities for science press and communications officers.

Universities, along with Stempra, should explore how to support the career development and progression of science press and communications officers. This should include creating opportunities for networking, training, and support for those at all levels, and providing more sustainable and attractive career propositions for those in entry level positions.

Recommendation 6: The science community should explore and address the challenges caused by the harassment of scientists who engage with the media.

The science community, including universities and science communicators, should work together to provide leadership on and a better understanding of the issues around the harassment and online abuse of researchers. All universities should have a policy in place to prepare their academics, and provide clarity on the support available.

Recommendation 7: Those conducting 'lessons learned' inquiries into the pandemic and beyond should include consideration of the role played by university communications teams.

When Government and policy makers are trying to understand the lessons learned around public trust in science from the COVID-19 pandemic, their lines of inquiry should include the role of UK universities, for example in responding to questions about the virus and its impact; and the role of university press and communications officers in facilitating this.

In the twenty years since the Science Media Centre (SMC) emerged from the media frenzies over the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine, genetically modified (GM) crops, and animal research, science media relations and research communications in the UK have changed radically. CROSPPO (the Changing Role of Science Press Officers) is a project set up to examine and chart those changes, through in-depth interviews, surveys, and focus groups.

The project's aim is to document and understand any changes that have occurred, explore the reasons for and impacts of those changes, and highlight any opportunities or gaps that now exist as a result. It is an evidence-gathering exercise aimed at providing a better-informed insight into a crucial area of science communication.

2.1 Background and context

The SMC's 20th anniversary offers an opportunity to reflect on the last two decades and inform the future. Since the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology report, 'Science and Society' (2000)¹, and the resulting establishment of the SMC in 2002, much has changed. The number of science press officers has increased, and every university now has a communications team or department. Science press officers play a critical and varied role in the process by which science and research reaches the public via the media. In many cases they are vital to ensuring balanced, evidence-based coverage of complex issues. An expert press officer can make all the difference to science news when it matters the most, working to bridge the gap between scientists and the media – especially a fast-moving news media where researchers may need support to navigate its demands. Never has this been more apparent than during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The role of press officers as critical mediators in the communication of science to the public, while often under the radar, has been acknowledged, for example in academic research from Professors Petroc Sumner and Chris Chambers², and Dr Gabrielle Samuel and colleagues³. The Academy of Medical Science's report, 'Enhancing the use of scientific evidence to judge the potential benefits and harms of medicines' (2017)⁴ recognised the role of press officers in ensuring the public gets balanced information about the latest research. It led to a widely adopted system⁵ where scientific organisations routinely label their press releases to help journalists put new research into context. Organisations such as Stempra – the UK network of science PR, communications, and media relations professionals – have also grown significantly in size and influence.

Despite the clear importance of science press officers, it is becoming apparent that their role is changing substantially. In 2016, as part of its evidence⁶ to the House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology inquiry into science communication, the SMC noted that,

“...the professionalisation of science communication has introduced some worrying trends. Some senior communications managers prioritise brand recognition and institutional reputation over openness, and it is not unusual for the SMC to be told by institutions that their experts will not be commenting for strategic reasons – even during crises where these experts are the best qualified to answer public concerns.”

In her recent book, ‘Beyond the Hype: The Inside Story of Science’s Biggest Media Controversies’ (2022)⁷, SMC Chief Executive Fiona Fox acknowledges that it is hard to fully understand the changes being observed, in part because the factors involved are complex and often opaque. While there is a great deal of anecdote about certain trends, there is also little documented evidence.

This project, and resultant report, are therefore an attempt to provide that evidence – to give a detailed account of the roles of science press officers in the UK. The findings and resulting recommendations will feed into the SMC’s 20th anniversary review and future strategy. They should also help inform discussions within the scientific community and be useful to university communications teams and executives considering their own strategic direction.

2.2 Objectives and scope

The overall objective of the project was to provide an informed account of the roles of science press and research communications officers in the UK, establishing whether and to what extent they have changed over the last twenty years. It is intended as a useful ‘snapshot’ of the sector, rather than an exhaustive exploration or academic analysis of every aspect of the issues involved.

In terms of scope, the project focused on:

- Science media relations and research communications specifically in universities. This provided clear direction and allowed an in-depth examination of a critical and complex sector. Possible future extensions to the project, for example looking at research funders, charities, publishers, or regulators, will be considered.

- Exploring the current roles, responsibilities, and objectives of science press officers and research communication teams within universities, and how these have changed over the past two decades.
- Examining some of the possible drivers of any changes, including but not limited to, the media landscape, the strategic direction of individual universities and the higher education sector, and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.3 Methods

The project used a mix of methods to gather evidence and insights:

- Structured in-depth online interviews with 41 participants. A roughly equal number of participants from the following categories were included: directors of communications and public affairs; heads of news or media and senior press officers; senior university executives (e.g. vice chancellors and presidents); senior and experienced communications professionals who have left the sector or field; early career press and communications officers; other relevant professionals (e.g. from university networks or agencies). Interviews were carried out between December 2021 and March 2022; a list of participants is included in Appendix 1.
- Online survey of a wider group of UK science press and communications officers, to gather more quantitative evidence and explore some of the themes arising from the interviews. 116 participants completed the survey in April 2022, 40 of whom worked in a UK university at the time. The full findings are available in a related report⁺.
- Online focus groups with 17 academic researchers based in universities, to understand their current communications and media relations needs, and their expectations of their press and communications offices. Participants were divided into three groups according to their level of responsibility and media experience, and worked in high profile areas most likely to appear in the news media. This work strand was carried out by market research company Ipsos; focus groups took place in May and June 2022. The full findings are available in a related report*.

⁺ <https://www.sciencemediacentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Online-UK-Press-Officer-Survey-April-2022-SMC.pdf>

* <https://www.sciencemediacentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Ipsos-Focus-Group-Report-Changing-Role-of-Science-Press-Officers-July-2022.pdf>



The project was led by Dr Helen Jamison, science communications consultant, guided by a small steering group of Fiona Fox, Chief Executive of the SMC, Dr Claire Bithell, Head of Communications at The Academy of Medical Sciences, and Mark Sudbury, Head of Global Network Development at The World 100 Reputation Network. Partnership funding and support were provided by The Academy of Medical Sciences and Stempra, respectively.

2.4 Analysis and interpretation of findings

The main sections of this report detail the findings from the in-depth interviews, cross-referenced with the findings from the survey of science press officers and the focus groups with researchers. While the findings are based on participants working in only a selection of UK universities at varying levels of responsibility and experience, the main themes and issues that emerged not just across interviews, but also the survey and focus groups, were notably clear and consistent.

Interview notes were transcribed and analysed to distil the key themes, using open-source qualitative analysis tool TAGUETTE to code and tag separate topics. Given the importance of reflecting as accurately as possible the voices of the participants, quotations were also taken from interview transcripts to use within this report, which were checked with the speaker to ensure their meaning was not distorted. Terms such as 'a few', 'some', or 'many' are used in the text to reflect areas of agreement and difference; they should be considered indicative rather than exact. The term 'press and communications officer' is employed generally to represent the range of job titles that participants held but were impractical to name individually.

THE ROLE OF SCIENCE PRESS OFFICERS HAS CHANGED

3.1 The establishment of a profession

Most, if not all, interview participants said that the role of science press officers has indeed changed, and that this had accelerated in recent years.

88% of press officer survey respondents said that their job, or the role they do, had changed in the last five years; 58% somewhat, 30% significantly

Many of them, particularly those who have been in the job ten, twenty, or even thirty years, described a ‘professionalisation’ of the role, from one that was previously unrecognised to a more strategic and skilled resource with a responsibility and workload to match. All universities, like organisations in other sectors before them, now have dedicated communications teams or even departments, some of whose heads or directors sit on the senior executive team. Around a third of press officer survey respondents said their work was highly valued by their organisation.

In the “early days”, participants said, universities were unusual if they had even one dedicated press officer. In many places, the role was fulfilled by internal administration staff without media experience and the work was primarily reactive.

“When I started there was only one other person with a background in journalism. Mostly comms people were seen as internal admins and there was no real impetus, it was slow paced and without much focus on the media agenda or timescales.”

Pete Castle, External Communications and PR Manager, University of Reading

“In the year before I joined, we had one part-time press officer I think, doing three days a week. There were no processes or strategy, and there was not much respect for what they did.”

Anonymous interview participant

“The culture was very different back then – a measure of a good administrator was that they could turn their hand to any job. There weren’t really people employed as experts in this field when I started and that has changed over time.”

Ather Mirza, former Director of Press, now Public Affairs Advisor, University of Leicester

As academics began to engage more with the communications agenda and accept the need to communicate more with the public, and the media, universities saw the value of having dedicated media expertise and press offices started to grow. Many took on former journalists who treated the university campus as “their patch”, applying a news-led approach looking for stories and proactively pitching them to the press.

“When I started at Oxford there were just three of us in the press office doing everything. After I became Head of Media we had a big period of growth. We went from being agile generalists to topic and faculty specialists, with greater support and investment in this important function for a university like Oxford with local, national, and international prominence.”

Nicky Old, Director of Communications and External Relations, Universities UK & former Head of Media, University of Oxford

“We became one of the first places to start deliberately looking for research stories to get more press. I had previously worked as a journalist for the BBC and newspapers, but this was a massive learning curve, I learnt on the job as a ‘hunter gatherer’.”

Claire Whitelaw, Deputy Director / Head of Communications and Engagement, Durham University

Press offices also became more systematic in their work. In some places, participants described having the licence and time to go out and meet researchers, to get as much coverage as possible for their work; the large ‘press pack’ of specialist science journalists at national news outlets also meant that press officers could get coverage in many UK media outlets all at once.

After the significant public controversies on issues like GM crops and the MMR vaccine, many described universities as “trying to get off the back foot”, and press officers were finding themselves increasingly busy. According to one interviewee, “the appetite for science news was enormous and you had to feed the beast”. Press offices were, however, still poorly resourced and some found themselves “doing everything”, while others were still not the main channel between researchers and journalists. Some took a step back and reassessed their processes, putting procedures in place, and providing training to academics to support them.

“At the outset we had a press office team, but it was organised in such a way that it wasn’t the principal conduit with the media – back then a reporter would ring a scientist directly and would often never get their call returned. We addressed all of this by appointing some really good communications people to ensure there was support for scientists and persuade them to engage.”

Professor Sir Malcolm Grant, Chancellor, University of York & former President and Provost, UCL

Many interviewees shared examples of the great impact this more proactive approach had, especially on issues as controversial as animal research, gene editing and stem cell research. Not only did it improve public awareness and understanding of such complex topics, it also had the benefit of raising the profile of the university itself.

“For years I provided news content and copy, always looking for the story and what journalists would need. This news-led approach culminated in our story about Richard III. This was great vindication of our approach showing that a news agenda-led way of working could have such impact for a university, and thereby raise its profile.”

Ather Mirza, former Director of Press, now Public Affairs Advisor, University of Leicester

According to those interviewed and surveyed, momentum has carried things in an increasingly strategic, corporate, and complicated direction. Over time, as the internal and external worlds in which they work have changed, the ‘professionalisation’ of the role of press officers has continued at pace.

“There is a lot more to consider now as a big story can get a lot of coverage not just in the UK but around the world – and it can spread in minutes. Writing a press release can be a complex process; there is expectation management, planning, sign-off with multiple partners or dealing with control from the NHS and government.”

Philippa Walker, Head of Media and PR, University of Bristol

“We have moved to becoming more strategic. Previously we focused on getting lots of media coverage, now we want to line up and support the wider university strategy, for example our work on COP26 and climate change. We have refocused a lot and prioritised showcasing our expertise. We have demonstrated our value to the senior management, and we make sure we are in the conversation at the start.”

Edd McCracken, Head of News, The University of Edinburgh

While many participants felt that the profession had come a long way, that the battle about the importance of communication “has been won”, and that the higher education sector is catching up to its peers in other areas, some offered a word of caution that there is still some way to go, both for communications, and for universities more generally.

“Professional comms services are developing in universities – we see the segmentation of things like student comms, internal, marketing, campaigns etc. But it is still inconsistent and some places are better than others. It really depends on the place and the people.”

Anonymous interview participant

“Many parts of the university system look out of date, for example, in bureaucracy and the scale of work. The system has not caught up to where it needs to be and comms has to be more agile, responsive, and adapt. We need to be comfortable with constant change.”

Anonymous interview participant

“For the sector generally, we are just waking up to how busy the rest of the world already was. We need to broaden perceptions and be more realistic about the world. By missing the bigger picture, universities are undermining the good work they do.”

Anonymous interview participant

3.2 The remit and responsibility of science press officers have expanded

Our interviews and survey found that as the role of science press officers and communications teams in universities has become firmly established, their remit and responsibility have expanded significantly. Initially having a core focus on responding to ad hoc enquiries from news journalists and “selling in” stories about the research undertaken at their organisation, interviewees said their work has become much broader in scope.

Many talked about a diversification and growth in the audiences they are aiming to reach – covering a huge range, from their immediate local community and businesses right up to specific markets and students around the globe. This has meant a more targeted, or “segmented”, approach to what they do; there is no longer a one-size fits all approach to the stories they are trying to tell, and it requires a more sophisticated understanding of who their audiences are and how best to engage them.

“We are much more global now, thinking about reputation and profile. The team is focused on international reputation and the influence of league tables; this is something that wouldn’t have happened five years ago.”

Anonymous interview participant

“On a macro level I would say that comms is becoming more insight-driven, and also more digital in focus. There is a greater use of polling and audience insight work, especially in the public sector. And I think it’s a good thing to have embraced.”

Sam Eversden, Head of Communications, Russell Group

The growth in this more strategic and ‘corporate’ approach to communications matches that seen in other sectors. It has brought with it real changes to the way that press and communications officers work. Press officers we spoke to described how they now spend less time on traditional press-release-based communications and more on an ever-increasing number of areas, from internal communications and stakeholder management, to campaigns and content planning. Work has also become more objective-driven, with a need to consider how each piece of communication specifically contributes to the overall brand and reputation of the organisation.

“Far broader remit for comms teams and professionals, especially internal and external stakeholder comms. Much more time spent on complex issues and crisis management.”

Anonymous press officer survey respondent

“We have become more campaigns focused. Means more content planning and stakeholder management than traditional press release-based comms.”

Anonymous press officer survey respondent

“We are moving on from the historic model of a press office just doing announcements about funding and findings. This is being encouraged by our VC – these days we’re thinking about overarching reputation and our research narrative, the bigger picture, our legacy, and are being more proactive than reactive.”

Russell Reader, Director of Strategic Communications and Brand, Keele University

3.3 Science press officers’ resources have increased but not universally

These changes have apparently been accompanied and facilitated by a general and steady increase in the resources available to teams – both in terms of staff and budget. Many of the press offices that started out with one or two members of staff, often part-time, are now sizeable teams in established communications departments.

“We have more resource now. Before I arrived here, there had been one person running both the press office and internal comms. It wasn’t seen as being important. That has now grown to seven people, and with a whole strategy behind it.”

Russell Reader, Director of Strategic Communications and Brand, Keele University

However, we heard this growth in resources has been uneven and disproportionately larger in some areas. While press and media teams rarely have more than between five and ten members of staff, in some places they are now noticeably dwarfed by huge teams dedicated to marketing and recruitment, sometimes of over 100 staff.

While some we spoke to said this had on occasion been helpful because these larger teams were able to relieve the press team of some work, others said they now struggled to compete with them for resources.

“We are a small team working on communications and media. However, in the last four to six years a huge marketing team of 160 people has developed.”

Anonymous interview participant

The way in which these teams and departments are structured also differs in different universities, because of the kind of and size of institution, and the approach of their senior leadership. In many places, we heard how press and communications functions have been subsumed into large ‘advancement’ directorates, and some as a result have a less direct relationship with, and less influence on, senior executives. As one interviewee suggested, “...having a marketing lead does change the approach to communications”.

Despite this, some places buck this trend and have maintained protected resource for communications, which is structured separately to marketing. A few places also have separate teams for reactive news and more proactive research communications within their communications departments. In such places, where they are fortunate enough to have the resources and senior support for this split, the benefits both to the teams and their organisations are clear. Interviewees said that as a result they were more effective in their work and the research at their institutions was more visible to external audiences, all of which helped to raise their institutions' profile.

“In other places communications and marketing are often combined, but here they are separate functions and I think that’s a good thing. Both are important, but they are different skills.”

Ryan O’Hare, Senior Media Officer (Medicine), Imperial College London

3.4 The skills science press officers need have broadened and diversified

The changes described during interviews have had a significant effect on the day-to-day job of press and communications officers themselves. Firstly, they have made a real difference to the skills and experience needed. Some interviewees mentioned that media relations were still core to their role, and jobs do exist that remain focused on the work of a traditional press officer – building relationships with journalists, responding to daily news, and pitching stories.

“Engaging proactively with the media is critical among a range of tools we should use to tell the story of what we do, why we do it and crucially who benefits. The reputation of universities and our ability to generate income to deliver our academic mission are intrinsically interdependent. So there is a massive benefit to generating media coverage because it supports student and staff recruitment, engagement with partners, alumni and donors, so there are lots of really positive knock-on effects to engaging with the media.”

Joan Concannon, Director of External Relations, University of York & Director, York Festival of Ideas

However, many also talked about how their jobs now involved a much broader range of skills, from digital and social media to producing their own video and audio content. They regularly shared the sense that they now need to be multi-skilled generalists, as opposed to the focused specialist they might have been in the past. Unless they were based in the small number of places with enough resources to support teams with dedicated specialisms, they now had to be adept all-rounders, producing content for multiple platforms at the same time.

“The bread and butter of the job is still press releases, but we’re now expected to do much more multimedia. The job is becoming less about news and more about content.”

Anonymous press officer survey respondent

“The move to brand, storytelling, and digital content means individual skillsets have needed to change and become more generalist. Some of the traditional press officer skills – news gathering, news sense, grammar even – have inevitably become less valued and are beginning to erode.”

Simon Dunford, Head of News, Media and Research Engagement, University of East Anglia

“Communications professionals now need to bring a 360-degree perspective – e.g. the political landscape, digital, how things resonate across stakeholder groups as well as how to interact with media. Many communications roles are more comprehensive than ten or even five years ago, I have seen a trend of job titles changing from things like media manager to communications manager.”

Alexander Buxton, Head of Strategic Communications, University of Oxford

3.5 The increase in pace and pressure of the job has been immense

Perhaps one of the issues raised most often across all the interviews carried out, was the sense that the pace and pressure of the job had increased hugely; for some this has reached overwhelming levels that now affect their job satisfaction. While some saw the increase in pace as a positive challenge, embracing it as an opportunity for development and as part of what keeps the job interesting, many found the role has become all-consuming – constant “firefighting”, long days, working weekends, and never being able to switch off or take a step back. The work-life balance that many used to enjoy has been not so gradually eroded.

“There is never a dull day, it’s a really fascinating job. The role has changed, it’s very intense, for example I have been working every weekend for the last eight weeks.”

*Claire Whitelaw, Deputy Director / Head of Communications and Engagement,
Durham University*

**Only 18% of press officer survey respondents said their workload is well balanced;
45% said it’s manageable, 35% said it’s excessive**

“Our communications output is huge and it feels like the pace has increased over the pandemic. At times it can feel like a bit of a treadmill that’s difficult to get off, so it can be a challenge to find that time to step back and work on the longer-term, or less immediate projects.”

Ryan O’Hare, Senior Media Officer (Medicine), Imperial College London

THE WORLD HAS CHANGED

4

4.1 The media landscape continues to shift

As well as asking people if and how the role of science press officers has changed over the years, we also asked why they thought those changes happened. One of the main reasons given was, predictably, the ever-changing nature of the media landscape. Shifts in news journalism and the mainstream media have been continuous, and there was a real sense that in recent years they had been even greater. Most interviewees talked about the explosion in digital and social media, with new channels and formats springing up all the time, combined with the pace of 24-hour global rolling news.

“..trying to get the balance right between new and old media – the world is so fast moving – how do we communicate something across long-form traditional channels and in the bitesize world of social media? We try to put together packages and use lots of assets across multimedia channels, hopefully then driving interest to the long-form stories.”

Tilly Haynes, Press and Communications Officer, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine

“There are also the changes coming from the 24-hour demands of media and social media, it’s a whole different ballgame. Responses are needed yesterday. It’s a completely different dynamic and fuelled by misinformation.”

Chris Jones, Head of Communications, Cardiff University

Many press and communications officers talked about how developments in social media offered the opportunity for them to reach their own audiences directly, with more control of the messages their organisations want to put out. It has also allowed teams to be more creative and tell new stories that align with their own objectives rather than those of the news media. Another positive aspect raised by several participants was the development of outlets like *The Conversation*, which they described as a useful platform on which academics could address issues in a more measured way; somewhere, especially for those with less media experience, to engage in a low-risk manner.

“We have our own platforms, making more of our social media reach and expanding how we can tell stories the best way. We have a long-form section on our website where we celebrate people and research across the university.”

Edd McCracken, Head of News, The University of Edinburgh

“The big changes include how much people now judge us on our website and our public communications. Our profile relies as much, if not more so, on what we say about ourselves as on what the media say. Media coverage is of course still important, and always will be. But these days, the way we tell our own stories, in our own words and pictures, is also significant.”

Natasha Martineau, Director of Enterprise Communications, Imperial College London

“The Conversation is a good example. It’s a really useful platform, especially for early career researchers wanting to explore comms and talk about earlier or broader research on what is a fairly non-partisan platform.”

Nishan Canagarajah, President and Vice-Chancellor, University of Leicester

The flip side to the advantages offered by these changes is that a more fragmented media landscape makes it harder for press officers to land and manage stories with broad public audiences, and some commented that they must retell the same story several times over but repackaged for different formats. That has added to the demands of the job, and the feeling that they must be permanently “switched on”. A few commented on the complex combination of ‘rolling news’ – focused on a small number of issues in much greater depth – with social media – focused on multiple issues in little depth, that now exists.

“The rolling coverage of big issues never ends – Brexit, Covid, Trump. The news agenda feels artificially focused on a small number of major issues that are covered in minute detail, leaving little room for anything else.”

Russell Reader, Director of Strategic Communications and Brand, Keele University

In addition, participants expressed concern that their relationships with journalists, and particularly specialist journalists, were getting more difficult as there are fewer of them working under greater pressure. Some of the mainstays of the job as a press officer – building and maintaining trust with journalists, having a good sense of what they are working on and how they might cover things – were felt to be disappearing as a result.

“Journalists seem under massively more time pressure. We rarely hear from them following up stories now and often have no idea really whether something is going to get picked up until the coverage appears.”

Simon Dunford, Head of News, Media and Research Engagement, University of East Anglia

Another finding worth highlighting is that several interviewees said the mainstream news media still very much matters, at least for now. Echoing recent reports from Ofcom⁸ and the Reuters Institute⁹, participants said that while they may be less important for younger audiences and print circulations continue to decline, the traditional national news outlets are still the most used by the public. Interviewees noted the continued impact of trusted news outlets, particularly broadcast, and the fact that even when journalists do use new channels, they still represent the same mainstream brands.

“We’ve designed our website to allow us to tell the stories we want to, directly to our audiences, giving us more ownership. This doesn’t mean bypassing the media completely, though. Media relations is still a really important channel – social media can be successful at getting our stories notice, but nothing beats getting in the news.”

Craig Brierley, Head of Research Communications, University of Cambridge

“The traditional media are still important, they still set the news and political agenda. They are declining but reach people through other channels even if no one buys a newspaper.”

Alan Ferns, former Director of Communications & former Associate Vice-President, The University of Manchester

“The job is more demanding now, but evidence shows that the traditional media still matter. Universities should have a vested interest in helping and working with them.”

Bob Ward, Policy and Communications Director, Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment & ESRC Centre for Climate Change Economics and Policy, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)

4.2 Societal debate has become more ‘high stakes’

Linked to the changing media landscape, was a sense that the increasingly ‘high-stakes’ level of societal debate was also driving changes in the role of press and communications officers. Many said dealing with the greater politicisation of issues, the so-called ‘culture wars’, and the proliferation of ‘fake news’ and misinformation was responsible for taking up large amounts of their time. They described how universities are under a much bigger spotlight than they used to be.

“The reactive side has really mushroomed. We have a long watch list of corporate or politicised issues to keep an eye on.”

Claire Whitelaw, Deputy Director / Head of Communications and Engagement, Durham University

“Culture wars have been hard for the sector, especially if you are still reactive and have no strategy or support. I can see how people feel overwhelmed. I have protected my team and research comms – it’s so important to what we do.”

Anonymous interview participant

“Communications reflects and channels our culture, and is suffering the issues that affect all our society. Can we fix this? It’s the victim of this free-for-all in societal debate.”

Anonymous interview participant

We were told of examples of when negative stories had exploded out of nowhere, and how some press offices were now spending much more time working with fact-checking organisations like Full Fact. All of this has added considerably to the complexity of the job and the number of challenges being juggled at any one time. Some noted that it was also making their organisations more risk averse because of the perceived potential for negative attention if they got things wrong.

“It feels like misinformation has increased, certainly in terms of material shared via social media and some activist groups, and we now do a lot more work with organisations like Full Fact, Reuters Fact Check and AP Fact Check.”

Ryan O’Hare, Senior Media Officer (Medicine), Imperial College London

4.3 Universities are more corporate and commercial

If the external drivers of change of the role of press and communications officers are large, then the internal ones described by participants appear no less significant. The biggest internal driver of change was seen by many as financial, due to the increasing pressure within the university sector – the ‘marketisation’ of universities and move towards a more commercial world where students are seen as customers. This has led in places, as described earlier, to the development of large marketing teams whose job it is to sell the university experience and recruit students.

“We have an advancement team like most institutions, and a dedicated team for student recruitment. There is an increasing focus on bringing different teams together more with communications, and trying to work together more strategically.”

Ryan O’Hare, Senior Media Officer (Medicine), Imperial College London

“A period of marketisation began and everything became about corporate advantage and reputation. This is what started to drive our comms and we became much more risk averse – things were considered from the perspective of what the corporate advantage would be.”

Anonymous interview participant

Some suggested that research communications was seen as the poor relation of marketing, often viewed only as a commodity, if at all. A few said that it was another factor in their institution becoming more risk-averse – for fear of doing anything that would damage their profile. Participants also said that the impacts of media relations and research communications on the ‘bottom line’ were often harder to prove, and their work was therefore valued less than that of their colleagues in marketing, who were often “...better at doing their own PR.”

“In the UK, media operations have largely been subsumed into central marketing, where there is a predominant focus on student recruitment.”

Justin Shaw, Chief Higher Education Consultant, Communications Management

“Here everything is geared towards students, but I think that misses the point and lots of audiences are ignored.”

Anonymous interview participant

It was apparent from the interviews that this growth of marketing – sometimes at the expense of press and communications – has not been universal. In some places there is a much more even split between the two areas in terms of the resources and value given to them. Where it works well, the two can mutually benefit each other and support the broader strategic aims of the institution – to the benefit of its reputation and profile.

“Although there is a common thread, there is no one-size-fits-all with university communications. Recruiting universities are often focused on marketing and consumer media as well as raising visibility of their research activities; higher tariff institutions need to balance the great proactive research stories with managing brand and reputation.”

Nicky Old, Director of Communications and External Relations, Universities UK, & former Head of Media, University of Oxford

It is also worth noting that some said the approach and personal values of their senior leaders is often what makes a difference to if and how press and communications are valued. They said that when the people at the top “get it” and understand the media, it can transform the role press and communications teams are able to play.

A separate, but related, development that has helped press and communications officers demonstrate their value more readily is the Research Excellence Framework (REF) exercise, the latest round of which happened in May this year. While the pros and cons of the REF in relation to assessing the impact of research and the effect it has on researchers themselves are widely debated, some of the press officers we spoke to said it gave them a significant opportunity to show how and where they can add value. Many of those interviewed said they had been sought out to help produce case studies and impact reports, and as a result felt as if their expertise was appreciated.

“The impact REF has also made a difference. We can help showcase studies and impact. We can show media engagement reaches other parts that the academic community can’t.”

Chris Jones, Head of Communications, Cardiff University

4.4 The COVID-19 pandemic has had a massive impact

On top of all these changes came the COVID-19 pandemic. Much has been written elsewhere about the role of scientists in the pandemic, and the impact it had on public awareness of and trust in science. But what of the role of science press officers? How did this huge global event affect them, aside from the obvious ways in which it affected us all?

The resounding impact, according to those we spoke to, was that it massively accelerated the trends they were already experiencing and the numerous ways in which their roles were already changing. Some of the effects were positive and others less so; both good and bad news travelled faster. In addition, there was a shift in key audiences: for many press officers their work became much more focused on their staff and students (for obvious reasons regarding welfare and remote working); for some there was a resurgence of news media interest as science and research became the only story around; and for others, they saw their time swallowed up by social media engagement, which “rocketed”.

For many press and communications officers and their institutions, the pandemic provided an opportunity for them to demonstrate their value to society and the public benefit of their research. In line with other recent research, such as the Wellcome Global Monitor 2020¹⁰, interviewees said the pandemic had driven an increase in public awareness of and trust in science. For a significant period, the news was filled with interviews, press briefings, and features where university academics provided the kind of authentic expertise the public were hungry for.

Some press officers also said their institutions had benefited from the way in which developments like the University of Oxford-AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine raised the profile of university research in general.

“Overall, the pandemic has had a positive effect on science communications and public interest. There have been a few negatives but mostly it has been good. The science literacy of the public and journalists has gone up.”

Professor Liam Smeeth, Director, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine

“Covid raised the profile of science and increased trust – we regularly saw Jonathan Van-Tam, Chris Whitty, Patrick Vallance and others in the media, and they were brilliant. At times I could see challenges with communication during the pandemic, but public awareness and engagement overall has increased. We’ve also seen experts disagreeing, which is a good thing. It shows the process of how science works.”

Professor Chris Day, Vice-Chancellor and President, Newcastle University

Some interviewed also said it had been a great leveller, and it had made scientists and researchers more accessible. Meetings no longer all had to be in person or focused on London or other large cities, they could happen at home without the need to travel; press officers didn’t have to get experts into TV studios or “down the line” using expensive technical set ups, they could do it all on Zoom.

“Before covid a lot was about physical meetings in London. Now we all use Zoom in our bedroom. It has been a great leveller.”

Pete Castle, External Communications and PR Manager, University of Reading

“Whereas now things are online, and viewers are more used to it, it’s much easier. There is much better global access to experts.”

Anonymous interview participant

“The pandemic hasn’t changed researchers’ approach, although some media outlets are now prepared to do low quality Zoom, and this has made it easier to do broadcast interviews.”

Sue Smith, Head of Press and Communications, Aston University

Others were, however, less positive. They described the amount of fake news they had to deal with as “mind-numbing”, and how, like many others in the university sector and other workplaces, they are now exhausted and “burnt out” by the last two years. The lack of face-to-face contact had been a significant barrier to a crucial part of their job, namely building trust and working relationships with both journalists and scientists. They found it harder to do their job without regular informal catch ups with specialist reporters or academics who might have stories to share. They also struggled without the immediate closeness of their colleagues, which was previously critical to their resilience to be able to handle such a high-pressure job.

Some raised the fact that the pandemic had made it more difficult to get any other stories not directly related to COVID-19 into the news. It was felt that other critical areas of research were “pushed out”, and for some it meant they had little contact with the news media for long periods of time.

“It has been a very challenging time for stories that are not covid. And there has been a reduction in the number of journalists who visit.”

Anonymous interview participant

There was also a broader sense of the pandemic being a missed opportunity for the university sector and science community more generally. Some press officers felt that their institutions had been unable to take advantage of the opportunity to raise the profile of universities that was offered by the raised profile of research. This point tallies with research carried out by The World 100 Reputation Network¹¹, which found that less than half of the public believed universities had been important in helping the world through the pandemic. In addition, there were times during the pandemic when scientists came under attack from the public and politicians, and some press and communications officers interviewed felt that universities did not do enough to help support or defend those scientists through these experiences.

“Covid has shown the scientific establishment still needs to be stronger and have more backbone. There were political attacks and irresponsible narratives about science, and social media made things worse.”

Bob Ward, Policy and Communications Director, Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment & ESRC Centre for Climate Change Economics and Policy, London School of Economics and Political Science

4.5 Other contexts seen as important

In addition to the major drivers of change described here, a few interviewees also mentioned other issues or contexts they felt were relevant. While talked about less frequently during the interviews, they are still worth consideration.

The first of these was the need for support from organisations with the expertise to work with research in the media by working alongside university press officers to support their efforts. The organisation mentioned most often was the SMC. Many said it had become an invaluable resource, which they would struggle without. They credited the SMC with driving some of the improvements in mainstream media coverage of science over the last two decades and said their ability to give a voice to scientists is needed more than ever. Interviewees referred to the COVID-19 pandemic as the best example of the critical role the SMC plays in the media coverage of, and public trust in, science and research.

“I would say the SMC is needed more than ever, no one can coordinate things on a national level in the way that it can.”

Jonathan Wood, Director of Society Programmes, the British Ecological Society & former Media Relations Manager, University of Oxford

“The SMC has really evolved, it’s trusted, has clout and improves the quality of coverage. The pandemic means that experts have become more visible and they have largely gained respect with the general population.”

Philippa Walker, Head of Media and PR, University of Bristol

One or two did note, however, that the existence of the SMC may be one of the reasons that institutional press officers hear less often from journalists, and challenged that it may represent a “single point of failure” in the system the more influential it becomes. By and large, though, press and communications officers seem to enjoy a mutually beneficial working relationship with the SMC and said they would like to work with them more, not less, in the future.

Stempra, the UK network for science communications professionals, was also mentioned by some interview participants, and those surveyed were more likely to be a member of Stempra than any other relevant professional organisation. Interviewees said that it was crucial that membership remain low cost, and that they valued the services and events it offered. It was clear that Stempra is a much-loved, valuable and established part of the community. However, some, particularly those at a more senior level, felt that given the pressures they were under and the challenges they faced, Stempra could do more to support them, and some had let their membership lapse.

Another issue that some interviewees said must be acknowledged more widely was the geographical context in which universities and their researchers operate – particularly regarding their regional and national location. Some felt this was too often ignored despite the challenges it created for their role. They talked of the difficulties in recruiting specialist science press officers outside London and the “golden triangle”, while others said their location made it harder for them to attract visiting journalists or get coverage in the national media. The pandemic also demonstrated that differences in regulation and policy between the nations of the UK added a layer of complexity to the communication of science and research that was not always recognised.

“The devolution context is important for us here. Some form of recognition that not everything is the same across the nations of the UK would be helpful. The pandemic has helped to break down barriers to London though, which is good.”

Chris Jones, Head of Communications, Cardiff University



The impact of Government agendas, from “levelling up” to plans to make the UK a “science superpower”, also played on some people’s minds, as did the impact of Brexit, which risked creating greater tension between politicians and universities.

“The science communication space is much more political now because of things like Brexit, and we still want to talk about things like international funding and collaboration. We need to be careful about creating fault lines between universities and politicians when, ultimately, we agree that a world-class science base is critical for the UK.”

Nicky Old, Director of Communications and External Relations, Universities UK & former Head of Media, University of Oxford

WHAT THESE CHANGES MEAN

5

5.1 Scientists engaging with the news media

Interviewees widely acknowledged that the acceptance and professionalisation of science communication over the last twenty years means many more scientists are willing to engage with the media, even on the most controversial issues, and they are better at it. Many of the press and communications officers we interviewed said they were much less likely to be met by “stony faces” when asking academics to speak with journalists. It was common for them to be approached proactively by researchers asking for communications help, and that researchers genuinely see the value and importance of engaging. This was echoed by researchers themselves in the focus groups, who said that informing the public was important to build the reputation of science and show a return on taxpayer investment. They were motivated primarily by the wider public good rather than personal career development.

“Researchers are generally more media savvy now and proactive about promoting their research.”

Anonymous press officer survey respondent

“Academics are much better at public understanding, they aren’t as aloof or difficult as they used to be. You rarely encounter that now.”

Alan Ferns, former Director of Communications and former Associate Vice-President, The University of Manchester

There was, however, an acknowledgement that barriers to researchers communicating remain, despite the advances that have been made. Some interviewees said that media training and support was not routinely included in researchers’ training, a fact also raised by academics in the focus groups, and that some university research leaders still do not value media engagement and therefore do not encourage their peers or their juniors.

63% of press officer survey respondents said the level of resource their organisation has available for supporting scientists engaging with the news media is less than adequate

Both the press officers we spoke to and the academics in the focus groups said that researchers, like other professions, are also busier than ever and under great pressure; even when they want to engage with the media, they may simply not have the time. Researchers talked about an ever-increasing number of priorities and – especially early in their careers – media relations is unlikely to be near the top of their priority list. Early career researchers in the focus groups often felt they had no mandate to do anything outside of their immediate day job of carrying out and publishing research. This lack of focus on media engagement could be seen among both early career and mid-level researchers. Among both groups there was an expectation that their engagement with the news media would fall in future as it would be driven entirely by their production of new papers rather than by researchers actively seeking to engage with the press.

“There are some absolute stars of course, but plenty of researchers who are still unwilling to engage with comms. My sense is that these days lack of time is the main reason though. They are under more pressure than ever before and most of them seem to be already working evenings and weekends.”

Simon Dunford, Head of News, Media and Research Engagement, University of East Anglia

Another striking trend from the interviews with press officers and the focus groups is that press and communications officers do not always work closely with their university academics who want to engage with the media or public. Some had the view that those researchers who were adept and confident with the media didn't need to go through the press office. Such researchers have direct relationships with the media and the SMC, which could be more effective as a result. Others – notably senior and experienced researchers – had taken advantage of social media as a platform on which to successfully build their own profile and explain their science themselves.

“There is a broad spectrum of understanding and experience among researchers engaging with the media. The more spokespeople understand the media, the more confident they feel, and the better their expectations. They become more proactive and build momentum of their own. With our most experienced spokespeople they come to us for a sense check or to let us know their plans but don't always go through us. We encourage them to take part in media engagements themselves directly, with our support.”

Alexander Buxton, Head of Strategic Communications, University of Oxford

There were other interviewees, however, who were concerned about some researchers bypassing their press office. They felt this could make it harder to keep track of what is being said and that press officers may not always find out when an academic from their university is speaking publicly about something high profile. We heard of difficult experiences where outspoken or discredited academics caused significant negative media attention that was difficult to respond to.

The theme of press officers being more hands off was also touched on by comments from some academics in the focus groups who said they struggled to get the time with their press office they needed.

Approximately half of participants mentioned the harassment of researchers as an additional barrier that now exists. Many described how, particularly during the pandemic, online “trolling” and abuse of researchers had at points become very hostile and difficult to manage. In some cases, press and communications officers said an increasing amount of their time was being spent providing “safeguarding” support to academics, although it was unclear exactly what their role should be in this situation. Some noted that it had put researchers off engaging with the media for fear of any kind of backlash.

“Universities are under a much more critical spotlight now, and everything has become more defensive. Increasing social media and harassment has also become very nasty and unpleasant.”

Professor Sir Malcolm Grant, Chancellor, University of York & former President and Provost, UCL

Only 30% of press officer survey respondents said they knew of policies their organisation had in place for supporting researchers to deal with online abuse

Some had a different experience. They acknowledged that while harassment did occur, the researchers they knew were well-prepared and pragmatic about it. A few said it was comparatively less than the harassment that had been experienced in the past by researchers working on animal research, for example.

“We haven’t had a particularly bad experience of harassment. We always prepare and support researchers using social media, but it hasn’t put lots of people off.”

Sue Smith, Head of Press and Communications, Aston University

Both the interviews and the focus groups suggest that experience of harassment or online abuse likely depends on the area of research and how high profile or controversial it is. How individuals deal with harassment and online abuse seemed to be dependent on the approach of the researcher and the institution. Whatever the case, it was clear that many interviewees thought more should be done to understand and tackle the issue.

“I don’t know about the impact of harassment. Some researchers love social media and don’t take it personally, others have been really put off by what they’ve seen. That’s why we need to learn more about how we should approach it.”

Nishan Canagarajah, President and Vice-Chancellor, University of Leicester

5.2 Public attitudes to and trust in science

If scientists themselves have got the message about the need to communicate with the media to explain their work to the public, and to improve public attitudes to and trust in science, what about their universities? The picture here, according to those we interviewed, is a bit more complicated.

At a broad, strategic level, participants were clear that universities are committed to engaging the public with research and sharing the knowledge their institution creates. Many universities – as demonstrated by the findings of our press officer survey – have some form of public engagement with research included in their overarching strategic vision or mission statement. Likewise, many of those we interviewed, and almost all of those who completed the survey, made it clear that they believe their university has a responsibility to improve public trust in science. They talked about the civic duty to communicate with the public and the wider “public good” aspects of doing so.

“We have a civic duty to show the taxpayer and government what we are doing. A lot of our experts who have been in the media are now advising government and a lot of them have a profile. It’s driven by us in the press office in part, and by the impact of our coverage on our senior leaders who value this work.”

Edd McCracken, Head of News, The University of Edinburgh

“Education and research are transformative for society, but the UK often seems to have an innate suspicion of, and bewilderment about, universities. A while back some UUK research showed that 80% of the public didn’t know that universities did research; the language and approach of academia can be alienating. My approach has been to think about how we can build trust with the general public – otherwise known as the taxpayer!”

Joan Concannon, Director of External Relations, University of York & Director, York Festival of Ideas

However, it was less obvious that these aspirations translated into strategic priorities for their press and communications teams to engage the media to maintain and improve trust in science. As highlighted by academics in the focus groups and some of the interviewees, the general public was not one of their university’s highest priority audiences; when they did cite public audiences, they were either quite far down the list or featured more as a specific subsection, such as the immediate local community. Participants described good reasons for this – such as the more strategic and targeted communications approach institutions are taking to achieve their organisational objectives. However, they were concerned about the risks the tensions between these differing objectives created.

“Public duty has always been important. It was a priority because of the funding model. Now universities do it to demonstrate public benefit and value to the local area – but that isn’t press, it sits with specific roles e.g. a professor of public engagement, which we now have.”

Ather Mirza, former Director of Press, now Public Affairs Advisor, University of Leicester

“The public are very important as an audience. Although the emphasis on how we reach them has changed – it is much more about social media rather than traditional media now, and lockdown has speeded up this change.”

Karen Bidewell, Head of Media Relations, Newcastle University

“Re the public, high priority is the regional and local area.”

Anonymous interview participant

90% of press officer survey respondents said their university only partly meets its responsibility to improve public trust in science

“I’m not sure yet how well we actively manage our communications to the public, it very much happens as a by-product of everything else we are doing.”

Nishan Canagarajah, President and Vice-Chancellor, University of Leicester

“General public awareness is quite broad and woolly as an objective, this is how it used to be defined but what does it mean?”

Claire Whitelaw, Deputy Director / Head of Communications and Engagement, Durham University

Some participants also felt that media relations and research communications – often the best way of reaching the wider public – were being squeezed to make way for the growth in corporate and reputation activities. They sometimes felt like press and research communications were treated as the “poor cousin” of student relations.

“Reactive comms is seen as the ‘important’ part, even though it’s mostly dealing with student press. Research comms is viewed as a poor relation, or a reputational exercise to counteract the negative coverage around student issues.”

Anonymous press officer survey respondent

65% of press officer survey respondents said their university had a strategic aim to engage the public; only 23% said they had an individual objective to improve public trust via the news media

Once again, it was apparent that this was not the case in every university. Some have managed to protect or even build their press and research communications teams, retaining a mandate to prioritise responding to and promoting science and research stories in the news alongside meeting their organisation's other strategic objectives. One or two even noted that when they can do this kind of work it has the much-desired side effect of improving their university's profile as a result anyway.

"The work we did through the Ebola epidemic didn't just improve our communications, it also helped with things like fundraising and student recruitment because it raised our profile."

Katie Steels, Director of Communications and Engagement, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine

Another view expressed was that individual universities could do more to work together in media relations and research communications to maximise their collective strength to make the case for science on the biggest issues of the day. Too many universities, according to some interviewees, were still working in competition – a fact worsened by the marketisation of the sector – and not realising the broader benefits to collaborating more in the public eye.

"It's hard to get the Russell Group universities working closely – there is competition. But they need to be more collaborative and think about the bigger picture."

Ceri Thomas, Editor and Partner, Tortoise Media & former Director of Public Affairs, University of Oxford

"Institutions don't understand strategic communications and the media is often treated as marketing, which is risky. A press office is an essential central strategic function. If they get this wrong, reputations can be trashed immediately. There is also a chronic myopia – they don't see how the broader issues in the community are relevant to them."

Bob Ward, Policy and Communications Director, Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment & ESRC Centre for Climate Change Economics and Policy, London School of Economics and Political Science

5.3 Science press officer careers and expertise

The final area of exploration in interviews centred on the careers and expertise of science press officers themselves – what do the changes and challenges mean for them, their science press officer colleagues outside universities, and the broader science community as a result?

It was clear when talking to press and communications officers that most of them really loved their jobs. They found their work exciting, inspiring, and rewarding, with more than one of them saying they “felt like a kid in a sweet shop” when faced with the opportunity to engage with research in their role. Their job provided the opportunity to pursue the things they were interested in and “make a difference” to the lives of others at the same time.

**61% of press officer survey respondents said they are satisfied in their role;
43% somewhat, 18% very**

“It’s a massive gear change to what I was doing previously but it’s fantastic, it’s really pushed me to be the best I can be. Every day is a wonderful challenge that brings something new.”

Patrick O’Brien, Senior Media Officer, Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, King’s College London

Many had not set out with the intention of becoming a press or communications officer in the higher education sector, but were glad this was where they had ended up. Many had started out as news journalists moving over into ‘PR’, or scientists moving into science communication either through experience or further education, and they saw their job as incorporating the best of all worlds.

“There are exciting roles out there and growing comms teams, and lots of transferrable skills from science to comms. My background really helps but it’s not a pre-requisite. It’s also about having the time and passion and storytelling ability.”

Tilly Haynes, Press and Communications Officer, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine

For some, their passion and enjoyment enabled them to see the changes they were experiencing as a positive challenge, pushing them to be their best and enabling them to be creative in their work. But for many others, the pace and the pressure combined with a genuine sense of being undervalued and unsupported, is becoming too much.

“Excessive workload and lack of progression. The work piles up, I continually meet challenges, but I’m still a relatively low pay grade.”

Anonymous press officer survey respondent

Many press officers described a sense of feeling “burnt out” and overwhelmed, particularly after the last few years and the experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, they also talked about issues that are clearly specific to the profession and how much their expertise is, or isn’t, valued.

"It feels like however much coverage we get, what we do is never quite enough and we're battling with branding and marketing pressures."

Anonymous press officer survey respondent

60% of press officer survey respondents said the level of resources they had was less than adequate

"I feel undervalued, underpaid, underutilised and often de-skilled."

Anonymous press officer survey respondent

This was particularly the case for those at a more senior and experienced career level. They described being stuck at the pinch point between trying to support and protect their press and research communication teams, and influence and gain the support of their senior leaders, with varying levels of success. Some said they were finding it difficult to compete with their marketing colleagues to demonstrate the impact of their work.

Some gave examples of where the lack of resources or respect for communications expertise meant that press officers with significant amounts of experience and skill were leaving their roles or the sector. There were examples given of when multiple members of a research communications team had left at the same time and, even on occasion, when whole teams had left their university.

"It is hard to recruit people with the skills that we have. A lot of junior people do a lot moving around and have no writing experience. It comes from the top, my replacement is all digital. People are leaving because of the toxic environment."

Anonymous interview participant

"Some understand the benefits of media work and value it. Others still don't quite get the value, even internally, especially those doing student recruitment and marketing. They want us to directly prove the link with the bottom line and they struggle to get it – the intangible benefits of media. But if you took it away you would notice!"

Anonymous interview participant

"There is a lack of understanding and appreciation of what we do, often within our own wider division. Engaging with news media is not seen as a priority by some, e.g. in the marketing team, whose focus is student recruitment, making content for social. They don't seem to grasp that in order to recruit students you need a good reputation, and that's what we're doing through our work raising the profile of our research and researchers."

Anonymous press officer survey respondent

Again, the background and approach of senior leaders within universities was perceived by interviewees as making a difference to these challenges. In universities where their senior leaders have experience dealing with the media and first-hand knowledge of the value of this work, press and communications teams appear more likely to have the resources and support they need. Participants also described how in universities with this culture, they were also more likely to have ‘a seat at the table’ for engaging with and influencing the biggest issues affecting the institution.

There was a consensus through the interviews that the role of science press and communications officers is much more challenging and complicated than it used to be, and that the increase in pressure, combined with a sense of being undervalued and having little career progression, meant some often consider leaving either their role, or the field altogether. These views were backed up by the press officer survey that showed how many had thought about leaving their job. Many interviewees said that more needed to be done to protect their expertise and support those in these roles, otherwise there is a genuine risk of them being lost to the sector.

“There is a real gap around the development of professionals working in communications. It’s not clear to me what their career path is or how we support them or whether they will stay in the field. This needs thinking about.”

Nishan Canagarajah, President and Vice-Chancellor, University of Leicester

83% of press officer survey respondents said they had considered leaving in the last five years; 30% often

“It’s difficult to imagine how much work comes across the desk of university press officers unless you work there. It’s always been hard to prioritise and that’s still true. It’s interesting but exhausting and it’s why some consider whether to stay or not.”

Katrina Nevin-Ridley, Director of External Relations, Communications and Public Engagement, UK Research and Innovation & former Press and PR Manager, The University of Edinburgh

“It’s now so complicated and overwhelming. I keep thinking is this the year I can’t carry on with it any more?”

Anonymous interview participant

Compounding the risk of experienced press officers leaving, some said they had struggled to recruit new press officers with the skills and experience needed. Several shared examples of recruitment exercises where they had received substantially fewer applications than they would have previously. Interviewees suggested there were many reasons for this – including the impact of the pandemic.

But there were other more specific issues for this sector: the decline of local journalism and thus fewer candidates with relevant news experience; and the reduction of media relations in many communications roles leading to the loss of experience. Participants said more must be done to support the profession.

“In ten years’ time me and my team might be a dying breed, replaced by content producers who don’t write like we do or ask the right questions.”

Anonymous interview participant

“With shifting priorities and ever-increasing demands on universities, it is a worry that the specialism of science press officers could easily be chipped away. We have a dedicated corporate comms team now that works closely alongside our research news team. This allows us to respond to the growing number of reactive enquiries about university business without compromising our research comms outputs, but I realise that not all organisations have the resources to achieve this. There is also the challenge of recruiting people with the passion and interest in science and associated sectoral issues to make sure we’re doing the best job for our research community, and I feel very fortunate that we’ve been able to build such a talented team at Edinburgh.”

Jen Middleton, Interim Deputy Director of Communications, The University of Edinburgh

CONCLUSIONS

6

These findings demonstrate clearly that the role of science press officers has changed in the last twenty years. They offer a snapshot of a successfully established profession that has benefited the science community, the media, and the public alike. The positive impacts of expert press and communications officers in universities are manifold and obvious – from the expert media relations support given to researchers in the spotlight, to the direct benefits of such work to their universities' own profiles. The UK is extremely lucky to now have such a dedicated and experienced network of specialists who also care passionately about the work they do.

This progress is, however, at risk. Participants across every aspect of this research told us the accelerating changes to the landscapes in which they work are creating significant barriers, which, for some, are increasingly difficult to overcome. In some universities, the move towards a more market-driven approach is inadvertently putting undue pressure on research communications and science media relations. In others, the enormous growth in the number of media channels, formats, and issues press officers must now work with means they are often overwhelmed and burnt out.

These challenges come at a difficult time following the COVID-19 pandemic, when societal debate is more politicised, the public mood is low¹², and harassment and fake news are putting some researchers off engaging. Now more than ever, science press officers in universities are an essential conduit between research and the news media; the public trust scientists and want to hear more from them¹³, and scientists themselves want to work more with their press officers. Yet those press officers do not feel they have sufficient resources, time, or support to fulfil their role effectively, and many have considered leaving.

Our report therefore includes several recommendations for how some of these challenges might be addressed by the SMC, the science community, science communicators themselves, and universities. They are based not just on the key findings and issues described, but on the proposed solutions suggested most consistently by participants. We hope these recommendations offer a constructive contribution to future exchanges about the sustainability and value of the profession, and we look forward to hearing others' views.

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APPENDICIES

Appendix 1: Interview participants

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Justin Shaw, Chief Higher Education Consultant, Communications Management

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Sue Smith, Head of Press and Communications, Aston University

Katie Steels, Director of Communications and Engagement, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine

Ceri Thomas, Editor and Partner, Tortoise Media & former director of Public Affairs, University of Oxford

Professor Richard Trembath, Senior Vice President (Health & Life Sciences) and Executive Director of King's Health Partners, King's College London

Philippa Walker, Head of Media and PR, University of Bristol

Bob Ward, Policy and Communications Director, Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment & ESRC Centre for Climate Change Economics and Policy, London School of Economics and Political Science

Claire Whitelaw, Deputy Director / Head of Communications and Engagement, Durham University & former Media Relations Manager, Newcastle University

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