Small Journals Can Get Press Coverage Too

Bill Black

Editor's Note: Although addressed primarily to editors at small journals, the article below also has much to offer other readers, including editors at larger journals who would like to know more about attracting mass-media attention and those of us more broadly interested in science communication. We hope you will enjoy this informative and engaging piece.

Admit it. Don't you feel at least a little envious when week after week you hear and see news stories that include such phrases as "according to a study in the latest issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* . . ." or "this week's issue of the *New England Journal of Medicine* reports that . . . "? Wouldn't you like to get a small amount of that kind of attention for *your* journal?

Many larger and medium-sized science journals already have media-relations activities that are producing news coverage for the articles that they're carrying. But can small journals, with small budgets and few staff members, develop their own public-relations efforts, start doing their own news releases, and begin to reap some of the benefits that can come from press attention?

I believe that smaller journals—such as the one that I work for—can do that, even with a modest investment of time and money.

The Benefits

So what could your small journal gain from writing and distributing press releases? One benefit can be mass-media coverage. Various research studies have indicated that many journalists rely heavily on press releases as a source for the news reports that they write. Katherine Arnold wrote a very informative article last year for *Science Editor* that reviewed some of the recent research on how journalists gather and select the news that they turn into news stories.[1] In turn, mass-media coverage—at least in the *New York Times*—can lead to more citations by other scientists of the scientific articles covered in the news reports, according to one study.[2]

You may have other goals as well for your media-relations efforts. Take the case of the journal I work for, the *Revista Panamericana de Salud Pública/Pan American Journal of Public Health*. Published by the Pan American Health Organization, the *Revista/Journal* is a monthly, peer-reviewed, trilingual journal (English, Spanish, and Portuguese) that focuses on public-health concerns in the Western Hemisphere. The primary objectives of our media-relations efforts are to raise our profile—throughout the Americas—and to increase the number of high-quality manuscripts that we receive.

Other benefits could come from increased mass-media attention, according to Diana Olson, director of communications of the Infectious Diseases Society of America. That society publishes two journals, *Clinical Infectious Diseases* and the *Journal of Infectious Diseases*, that started issuing regular press releases last year. Mass-media efforts with the journals, says Olson, "promote the visibility and the strength of the journals. The journals are one of the most important services for our members, and they're an important source of revenue."

Mass-media coverage can be a way to educate the general public about a particular field of science, and that greater awareness could lead to additional federal funding for research, points out Carlton Erickson, an associate editor of *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*.

You may have other goals as well, such as publicizing research that might encourage people to take on healthier lifestyles or providing information to help government officials make better policy decisions. Producing news coverage of their articles can be a way for you to reward your authors who like that kind of attention. Before you try to even choose the first article that you might want to publicize, clarify your particular goals, because the goals will heavily influence what press releases you write, how you distribute them, and how you judge your results.

In the sections that follow in this article, I'll try to give step-by-step suggestions for identifying interesting news that might lead to press coverage; writing a news release, even if you've never done it before; distributing the release; and tracking and evaluating your results. I'll focus on getting coverage in the print media and on the Web, rather than on television and radio, which I believe is harder and more time- and labor-intensive—an obvious concern for a small journal.

Identifying What Is "News"

Any press release you put out should be "newsworthy", but how do you know if a particular subject merits attention? The best starting point is your knowledge of the field that your journal covers. If you think that the findings in a particular article are important, it will be that much easier to convince a journalist of that. In my case, I watch for articles to publicize as I'm editing them; I keep an eye out for such phrases as "the first study to ever . . ." or "while previous research has found, our results show that. . .". Some journals also take suggestions from the authors whose papers they have accepted. That is true for the journals published by the American Physical Society (APS), according to David Ehrenstein, the editor of *Physical*

BILL BLACK *edits the English-language materials in the* Revista Panamericana de Salud Pública/Pan American Journal of Public Health, *a trilingual journal published by the Pan American Health Organization.*

Review Focus, a free APS newsletter that is intended for students, physics researchers, and journalists and that carries stories similar to press releases that explain selected physics research published in the APS journals. (APS also regularly distributes press releases on its journal articles.) APS asks interested researchers who think their research is newsworthy to send in an "author summary" of just one paragraph written at a level that the researcher thinks an undergraduate college student studying physics could understand.

Much research has also been done to try to define what is "newsworthy". The *Science Editor* piece by Katherine Arnold summarized several recent studies.[1] Another *Science Editor* piece, in 2001, described a presentation that Susan Okie, a medical writer for the *Washington Post*, made at the 2001 CSE annual meeting.[3] Okie pointed to such traits as firsts and superlatives, new information about prevalence and risk, and such "hot" topics as stem cells, genetic engineering, and obesity.

And what about fields of science outside medicine? In her *Science Editor* article, Katherine Arnold discusses some of the categories that *Science* and *Nature* see as newsworthy.[1] These include "critters", that is, such animals as dolphins, dinosaurs, dogs, and sharks; outer space; cloning; the human genome; and controversial topics, such as genetically modified foods and global warming.

Also newsworthy are stories that are surprising or "counterintuitive", that is, that go against what people generally expect or think to be true, says Ehrenstein of *Physical Review Focus*. For example, a press release titled "Drinking extra fluids during a cold may not be beneficial" that the *British Medical Journal* distributed in February 2004 produced a great deal of mass-media coverage within just a few days of being released. One of the more successful press releases that our journal has put out was for an article reporting on amounts of sports and other physical activity during leisure time in Brazil; the release was headlined "Even more 'couch potatoes' in Brazil than in the United States".

Even if your journal covers a field of science that seems abstract or far outside the day-to-day experience of the average person, you can try to relate the research to a subject with which readers might be familiar or to explain the possible applications of the new knowledge. For example, some of the physics and mathematics news releases that I've seen over the last year or so have used such titles as "Card tricks and mathematics: applying the magician's trade to numerical dilemmas", "Statistician: handicapping system favors better golfers", "Mathematical model provides new tool to assess mail-borne spread of anthrax", "Math discovery may aid resource management", "Old equation may shed new light on planet formation", "How to hit home runs", and "Archimedes scholar finds something to holler 'Eureka!' about".

Over time, you can develop a better sense of what is "news". Take a few minutes each day over a week or two and note the science stories that your local newspaper carries. Check both the topics and the source of the news, that is, whether the story was written by a local reporter; was reprinted from a larger, regional or national newspaper; or came from a wire service, such as Reuters or Associated Press. Look at the Web sites of one or two major regional or national newspapers to see what stories they're covering. If your journal is in medicine or health, check the stories carried each day by the Reuters Health service (*www.reutershealth.com*).

The news section of the Yahoo! Web site can also be informative, with specific subsections on such fields as technology, science, and health. The news reports there come from wire services and other sources. In each of those subsections you can even click on a link called "most popular" and see which news stories visitors have chosen most often to e-mail to their friends and colleagues.

Another useful Web tool is the news section of the Google search engine. You can do searches to find out what news articles have appeared over the preceding month on any topic that you choose. You can also set up "new alerts" so that you will receive e-mail telling you when new stories appear on specific subjects. For example, for our journal I've set up several alerts, using such terms as "medicine" and "public health" in combination with "Latin America" and "Caribbean".

In a similar way, you can use the press releases that journals, universities, research centers, and other organizations have issued, such as on EurekAlert! (*www.eurekalert.org*). EurekAlert! is an online news-posting service that was created by the American Association for the Advancement of Science. EurekAlert! has 14 subject divisions, including agriculture, archeology, biology, chemistry and physics, medicine and health, and space and planetary subjects. Pick a subdivision that covers the field of your journal and look at the types of press releases that others have posted. Not only will that help you see what other journals consider to be "news", but you'll begin to see how that news is packaged in the form of a press release. For recent news releases that you like, you could do a quick search in Google and see whether reporters also thought the information was important enough to warrant a news story.

Writing a News Release

Much as is true with the IMRAD structure for journal research articles, the basic formula for a press release is highly standardized. Because you've mastered that format for the articles that you edit and publish, with a little practice you should be able to do the same with news releases.

An abundance of good advice is available on how to write a press release. You can find lots of suggestions in books on public relations; check your local bookstore or *Amazon.com* or any of the other online bookstores. The Web has thousands of sites that offer guidance; do a Google search for "how to write a press release".

Small Journals continued

Those sets of recommendations are often posted on the Web sites of companies that will distribute your release to their news-media lists for a fee.

I wrote my first press release more than 20 years ago after reading just a single book chapter. The press release concerned a group of low- and moderate-income tenants in Washington, DC—including me—who were trying to buy their rental apartment building to convert it into a housing cooperative and renovate it. We were looking for other persons to move into the building and become resident-owners with us. The release led to coverage in the real-estate section of the city's two major newspapers—just where we had hoped the news would appear.

A news release lists the contact information for a person who can provide additional details; give the name, telephone number, and e-mail address. A short headline should both summarize the news and encourage the journalist to continue reading. In the headline, try to avoid abbreviations or jargon that will confuse the reader. Also remember that something that may be understandable to journalists in your immediate atea—either geographically or scientifically—may be confusing to other reporters. For example, when I read a release posted on EurekAlert! that was titled "Rush testing kinder, gentler therapy for lung cancer", I was left wondering why quicker testing would be better. It turned out that the release was from the Rush-Presbyterian-St. Luke's Medical Center, in Chicago.

The body of the press release will follow the inverted-pyramid format typical of many news stories: the most important conclusions or facts are given first, followed by supporting details and background information that describe the context and importance of the news. A final section of the release—generally not intended for the public to read—can tell journalists how to obtain a copy of the complete article and give information on contacting one or more of the authors for an interview. On EurekAlert! you can have a separate section of the press release that provides that information and that is accessible only to journalists who have registered with the service.

Much of the material for the release could closely follow the information you've already prepared for the abstract of the article. That is, the abstract tries to give a clear summary of the most important information about why the research was done, what methods were used, the results, and the importance of the researchers' findings. However, depending on the audience that you're trying to reach, you'll probably need to simplify much of the technical terminology in the abstract. "We try to make our releases understandable to a nonspecialist audience", comments Brooke Grindlinger, the science editor of the *Journal of Clinical Investigation*. Ehrenstein takes a similar approach when he reviews the press-release-style stories that other staff members write for the *Physical Review Focus* newsletter. "I especially edit the first paragraph", he says, "so that it's in lay terms and appeals to a broader audience." After you define your audience, he says, "write a little 'lower' than that", that is, simplify the language a little more than you think the intended readers may need.

There are different views on the best length of a press release. Some persons recommend just three or four paragraphs, or under 200 words. That can be enough to catch the attention of journalists and persuade them to go and see the entire article. For the journal where I work, however, we tend to write longer releases, even up to 800 words. Some journalists will write a short piece by using just the press release, without seeing the journal article on which the release is based. By presenting more information in your release, you save reporters from having to telephone you and ask for more details or request a copy of the journal article. In addition, some Web sites that are looking for interesting material and will post press releases free will put up your entire release. If you put more information in your press release initially, there will be enough details for anyone visiting that Web site to understand your news more easily. Whether you choose to write longer or shorter press releases, make the headline and the first paragraph as interesting as possible. That will help to attract the attention of reporters and other readers and keep them reading, regardless of how many more words there are in the release.

Much of the above advice on writing a press release applies to reaching a general audience. To target narrower, more specialized groups, such as reporters who have a special interest in your journal's subject, one approach is to send out your complete table of contents or one-paragraph summaries of the most interesting articles in the issue. Those kinds of materials could also go to other journals in your field, possibly leading to short "in the literature" or "in the news" items, suggests Grindlinger of the *Journal of Clinical Investigation*.

Who writes your press releases—and how many you produce each year—will depend on the resources that your journal has. Our journal would like to put out one release a month, but we've never had enough time ourselves to do that or the extra funds to pay someone else to do it. I write the releases in my "spare" time, after I've finished doing all the technical editing on the articles.

If someone on your staff has some training or background in journalism or nontechnical writing, that can be helpful, but it's not necessary. Given the formulaic structure of most press releases, if you've done almost any other kind of editing or writing, it won't take you long to start writing good ones.

If you feel intimidated, or if you just don't have the time, try to get help from outside your journal staff. You might try the communications office of the scientific society or publisher that puts out your journal. You could also contact the media-relations office of the university, government agency, or research center where the authors of the article work. Using some

outside funding it obtained, *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research* has hired a freelance writer who produces several press releases per month. If you don't have the money for that, consider finding an intern who is studying journalism or technical writing. Your journal could benefit from the press coverage, and the student would have writing samples and the "clips" of any resulting press coverage to show to potential employers.

Working with Authors

As you begin considering articles for possible press releases, you need to find out how cooperative—or not—the articles' authors will be. Some researchers will be delighted with the exposure that could result, and they'll help you, for example, by commenting on your draft press release and conducting interviews with reporters. Other researchers may feel completely the opposite, not wanting you to put out any kind of special announcement concerning their article. Some scientists think that seeking press attention is a form of "grandstanding" that their fellow researchers will frown on. Other researchers think that the news media tend to oversimplify or sensationalize complex issues and misrepresent what scientists say. Some researchers who conduct studies with animals fear that press coverage will lead to unwanted attention from such groups as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

Even when authors are willing to help, journals differ as to whether they ask those scientists to review a draft press release. Some journals want that, but others don't find it helpful. "We used to do that", says Grindlinger, of the *Journal of Clinical Investigation*, "but we found that some authors 'couldn't see the forest for the trees' and wanted to get into the details of their research. We explain to them that the release is just a 'teaser', to get reporters to download the paper, read it, and decide on their own if they want to call the researcher."

Our journal has found that authors' suggestions on our draft releases are helpful; among other things, it assures us of their willingness to answer questions from journalists. However, we try to keep their comments on target by asking them to focus on just two questions as they go over the draft: (1) Is the information accurate? (2) Does the release emphasize the most important points that you wanted to make in your article?

For authors who are willing to do media interviews but lack experience, there are a variety of ways in which you can help them prepare. If the scientist is at a university or research center that has a public-relations office, a staff member there may be willing to do a little coaching. The same may be true for the person who handles media relations for the society or the publishing house that puts out your journal. A helpful article appeared last year in *the Journal of General Internal Medicine*.[4] A much longer guide, titled "You and the Media: A Researcher's Guide for Dealing Successfully with the News Media", is available free from the Web site of the American Geophysical Union (*www.agu.org/sci_soc/MediaGuide.pdf*). That text also includes information on conducting television interviews, in case your media-relations efforts progress beyond the print media.

Distributing the Press Release

In deciding how to distribute your press release, you need to consider various factors: your goals for your press-relations efforts, the audiences you hope to reach, what response you want from those audiences, the amount of time that you and your authors have available to send out copies of the article or deal with inquiries from journalists, and whether you already have access to a suitable press list. Think about the possible responses and who will handle them. How many telephone calls from journalists can you handle, given your other duties? Will the researchers have time to do interviews with reporters? Some advance planning can reduce your workload. For example, instead of having journalists telephone you one by one and ask for a copy of the article, post the article on your Web site and give the Internet address for it at the end of the press release, in the section intended to be read only by journalists. Also put in that section of the release the contact information for the author, so reporters don't have to telephone you and ask for it.

With respect to your goals and the subject of a particular article, you may want an audience that is as broad as possible, for example, as many of the major and smaller newspapers in the United States as you can reach. Or you may benefit more by reaching a much smaller but more targeted audience. For example, because the number one goal for our journal is to attract more high-quality manuscripts from experienced authors in public health, we've been very happy with several stories based on our press releases that appeared in *Nation's Health*, which is the monthly newspaper of the American Public Health Association. Similarly, our journal covers public-health issues in the entire Western Hemisphere, so we're also seeking press coverage outside the United States, which may not be important to your journal.

Obviously, you want to put the press release on your journal's Web site or on the Web site of your journal's parent society or publishing house. Ask the authors of the article whether their institutions would be willing to post a version of the press release on their Web sites. Some science-related Web sites will look at your release, possibly rewrite it, and then post it free. One of those is ScienceDaily (*www.sciencedaily.com*).

A number of science journals use EurekAlert!, the Web service mentioned earlier, to post their news releases. Many journalists regularly visit the site looking for story possibilities. The press releases on EurekAlert! can be "embargoed" (see the next section), allowing journalists who have registered with the service to read the press releases and begin working on their stories before the releases can be seen on

Small Journals continued

EurekAlert! by the general public. You can choose to pay for releases one by one, or you can purchase an annual subscription that allows you to post an unlimited number of science-related press releases. Fees are lower for universities and other nonprofits than they are for corporations and public-relations firms: $125 vs $285 per press release, and $1250 vs $2500 for an annual membership.

A number of journals distribute their releases only through EurekAlert! That is the case, for example, with *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research* (but the journal also offers its press releases to the authors' institutions, to be rewritten and distributed as each institution chooses). Posting only on EurekAlert! can be enough to lead to a number of newspaper and magazine reports, as well as postings of the release in its original or rewritten form on other Web sites.

In addition to or instead of posting to a Web site like EurekAlert!, many journals send their news releases to journalists on a mass-media list. If your journal doesn't have such a list, you may be able to use a list that belongs to your parent scholarly society or publishing house. Or an author's institution may be willing to send the release to its mailing list.

If you don't have access to a media list that way, you can pay others a fee to send the release to lists that they have developed. One such mailing service that serves mainly universities, medical centers, and other nonprofit groups is AScribe (*www.ascribe.org*). Rather than requiring journalists to go and look at the releases posted on a Web site, as is the case with EurekAlert!, AScribe sends its clients' releases to newspapers, news magazines, radio and broadcast networks, Web sites, and other outlets that have specifically asked to receive AScribe pieces. "That's an advantage", says Jennifer Donovan, an information officer and science education editor with Howard Hughes Medical Institute, in Chevy Chase, Maryland. "It goes to the editors directly, so it should get more attention." (Her institute also posts its releases on EurekAlert!)

An AScribe annual membership costs $125, and clients purchase a prepaid package of releases that may be used at any time during the annual membership. The cost per release depends on the number of releases purchased; for nonprofit groups, the minimum is five releases, for $425. AScribe charges higher fees for public-relations agencies and corporations. A number of similar services distribute press releases; you can find lots of them by doing a Google Web search using the term "news release service". Before you sign up with any of them, however, be sure to ask how good their coverage of the science and technology media is, not just the general press.

Another alternative is to develop your own mass-media list. It will save you from having to pay a fee each time you send out a release, but developing a list and keeping it up to date can be time-consuming.

If you want to build your own list, you can start from the Google news alerts that you set to let you know about stories related to your journal's field. From the stories that you find, you'll be able to identify specific journalists, newspapers, magazines, and Web sites that might be interested in your news. Some of those pieces might provide contact information—such as an e-mail address, a fax number, or a postal mailing address—that you can use to send out your releases, but many will not, in which case you'll have to take time and look on the organization's Web site for a staff directory or you'll need to e-mail or telephone the organization and request the contact information. As you're building your list, include reporters at individual newspapers and magazines, as well as wire services, such as Reuters and United Press International. Smaller news outlets, such as local newspapers, will often pick up a science news story from a wire service rather than having a staff reporter who specializes in science write a piece, as larger newspapers will often do.

Various mass-media directories provide contact information for journalists. A number of them, categorized by medium, are available from Bacon's Information (*www.bacons.com*). Among them are ones for newspapers and magazines; radio, television, and cable; and Internet media. The company also has a directory for medical and health media. The guides are expensive, starting at $300 per volume. Similar directories, at similar prices, are offered by Burrelle's/Luce (*www.burrellesluce.com/mediadata/mdir.html*). Given the prices of the directories, it's worth checking with public, university, and other libraries in your area to see whether they have copies.

Another way to begin building a press list is through the National Association of Science Writers (*www.nasw.org*). By joining the group, you can attend member events and meet writers who might be interested in the subjects that your journal covers. In addition, for $250, NASW will sell its mailing list of 1400-plus writers on address labels. You could use those labels to send out a news release with an invitation for the addressees to let you know that they'd be interested in receiving future press releases from you. The NASW Web site also has links to a number of local affiliates; writers can belong to the local groups without joining the national organization.

Another way to build your press list is to allow media representatives to sign up by using a fill-in-the-blank form on your Web site. For one example, see the "Media Information and Press List Sign-up Form" of the Infectious Diseases Society of America (*www.idsociety.org*).

Using an Embargo on Your Press Release

When you send out a press release, you may want to embargo it. The reporter who receives the release has advance notice of when the journal and the article described in the release will be published, can access the full text of the article and conduct interviews with the authors and other experts, and write the news piece. But

the news story can appear only after the embargo day and time that the journal has stipulated in the news release.

Although sometimes controversial, embargoes can offer advantages both to science journals publishing articles on complex topics and to the reporters who cover those subjects.[5] It gives a journalist enough time to prepare a well-researched story. Media outlets can't publish the news until the embargo expires, so reporters working on a piece don't have to worry that other journalists will "scoop" them and put out the news first. In addition, knowing that other writers may be preparing a piece pushes a reporter to go ahead and do a story, so that his or her newspaper or magazine won't be publishing the information after other outlets have put out their reports.

Tracking and Evaluating Your Results

As with many of the other tasks involved with press releases, you can try to track your results yourself, or you can pay someone else to do it for you. If you want to be extremely thorough in learning which media have used your press release, you can hire a fee-based clipping service to monitor newspapers, magazines, and radio and television broadcasts. Check with some of the companies that produce the media directories mentioned earlier, or just do a Google search for "news clipping service".

If you'd be satisfied with just a general idea of the print media and Web news outlets that pick up your press releases, you can use the news-alert feature that Google offers. One alert can be for the name of your journal. In some instances, the news reports won't mention your journal's name; they may instead say something like "a journal published by the ABC Society". For that, set another alert for the name of your parent society or publishing house. You can also set individual alerts by using the name of the article's author or the subject of the press release. You can do additional searches by using the main Web-search function of Google to see whether any Web sites have picked up your press release.

One helpful feature that the EurekAlert! service provides is monthly reports that detail how many times your press releases on their site have been accessed. It won't tell you directly whether your press releases have led to a news story, but you can compare the counts for your various releases to gauge the interest in different subjects and to assess whether you're getting better at writing press releases.

Don't limit yourself to just counting the viewings of your release or the news stories that resulted. Think back on the goals that you initially identified and the audiences that you wanted to reach. Have you gotten through to some of your target audiences? Have you received the responses that you had hoped for?

You can also view your results in terms of costs and benefits. For example, news coverage that you produce might lead to new subscribers for your journal, new memberships in your society, or additional advertising revenue for your journal. In the case of our journal, the time that I spend now writing and distributing a press release could save me time later if the resulting press attention helps to attract better papers that will be easier to edit. And, as you assess your initial results, keep in mind that as you become more experienced in writing press releases and you develop your media list, the tasks should become easier, and your results should improve.

If the step-by-step process I have described seems feasible to you, I hope you'll jump right in and soon be issuing your own press releases. If it all looks too overwhelming at this point, start with something small. Take 5 or 10 minutes several days a week and check your local press and the national press for science stories, or look at the science pieces on the Yahoo! news site, or see what other journals are posting on the EurekAlert! site. Or do a search with the Google news-search function, and set up some alerts so that you can start learning which media are covering your field of science. All those simple tasks will build skills that you can apply when you begin to write and distribute your own press releases.

With a modest amount of effort on your part, it could soon be *your* journal that is mentioned in the news stories that announce "according to an article in the latest issue of. . .".

References

1. Arnold K. Journals, the press, and press releases: a cozy relationship. Sci Ed 2003;26(3):82-4.

2. Phillips DP, Kanter EJ, Bednarczyk B, Tastad PL. Importance of the lay press in the transmission of medical knowledge to the scientific community. N Engl J Med 1991;325(16):1180-3.

3. Deming S. From data to headline: how science is reported in the newspaper. Sci Ed 2001;24(5):154.

4. Stamm K, Williams JW Jr, Noel PH, Rubin R. Helping journalists get it right: a physician's guide to improving health care reporting. J Gen Intern Med Feb 2003;18(2):138-45.

5. Blixrud JC. The future of the embargo. Sci Ed 2004;27(1):7.