

## **Community Archaeology Group tea break: 'Managing the Message: Archaeology in the Media'**

Honestly, I could easily talk for an hour about all the things I do to try and make a press release successful, but I only have 10 mins today so I'm going to specifically focus on tips to help control the narrative around archaeology news stories and communicating discoveries clearly, responsibly, and engagingly for the public.

### **What Are We Up Against?**

You've seen the headlines which range from the frustrating ("the archaeologists baffled" line is a common one), to the exhausting tenuous connections (Mary Queen of Scots and Robert the Bruce), to the downright racist, sexist or homophobic.

It's a bit of a minefield out there, but the good thing is, with horrendous headlines on the rise, people want feel-good stories to cut through the doomscrolling. And this is where we can provide that content.

### **What Makes a Good Press Release?**

It doesn't have to be a discovery made through excavation – we've had good press around post-ex analysis, a new publication, or an old publication being made open access, or even a research framework, or an upcoming event.

In 2025, I wrote a story which garnered print coverage from the BBC, STV, The Guardian and The Smithsonian, with an estimated print circulation of 1.8 million and that's not to mention the social media and TV coverage.

This was focusing on a project we'd recently given a research grant to. The grant was just over £1k but that's not what mattered, what matters is the quality of the story and how you present it.

### **So, some tips to guide you:**

Structure:

Journalists will tell you that they are pushed for time and you need to make their job SO easy for them. They could do this blindfolded and not get any of the facts wrong.

Understand what goes into different parts of a press release – I've taken chunks of a recent press release (our Spring 2026 grants) to show you

Headline and first line – we're going to talk more about this in the next section

Main body – struggling to start? Checklist: who, what, where, when and why

Subheadings – if it's a particularly long press release, don't be afraid to signpost the different sections

Quotes – opinions (ideally these will be attributed to someone who is comfortable speaking to journos after). Don't be afraid to draft your expert's quotes! And remember, with quotes, journalists

may only print the first line, so make sure you say what you want to say in one sentence. Anything else they print is a bonus.

Call/s to action – what do you want a reader to do after learning all this?

Link to images – make this really visible so they don't pull images off the internet which may be wrong to attach to your story

Notes to Editors – this section is your friend – that's where you can put all that extra detail to explain the stakeholders involved and the nuances of your story. Have explainers ready for things that you report on often (e.g. what a crannog is, or who the Picts are, or what your project is (e.g. the A9 dualling project is an initiative...))

Image Notes to Editors – same deal. Specially, we include for each image a caption, a description of what you're looking at, the place shown in the image and a credit. Remember, they may only print a headline with images and their captions, so make sure your caption tells the story

Contact details – so if they have any questions, they know who to ask!

### **Content (Writing tips)**

Hook – doesn't need to be sensationalist (doesn't need to link to Robert the Bruce or Mary Queen of Scots) but does need to be interesting. Archaeology happens every day across the UK, what makes *this* news? Think superlatives, is it the oldest? The biggest? The only? The first? Is it rare or unique?

What does it reveal about our past that we didn't know before, and perhaps what does it/could it tell us about our present or future?

The great thing about archaeology is that our line of work actually intersects quite well with journalism in that good journalism looks for the human stories, and that's what we do! We're interested in the remnants of human lives left behind, things that connect our current society to a past one. Think about the human experience, how we eat, how we celebrate, how we love, how we mark death etc.

Headline – be aware that the journalist might only read the first three words. So there's got to be something in there that catches their attention. Either a place, like Aberdeen or Islay, or a date (e.g. 3,000-year-old), or an important event e.g. Battle of Culloden, or a group of people e.g. volunteers, students, schoolkids, Glasgow residents, New Scots or refugees

Big up popular aspects e.g. Castles, crannogs, royal connections, etc

Be aware that a good press release (if you're starting from scratch) takes weeks to craft. Be selective about the stories you put work into.

### **Cultivate Relationships with Journalists**

The best bit of advice I can give to you for getting good press coverage and for controlling the narrative around your stories, is to cultivate personal relationships with journalists.

When a journalist has run your story, drop them a line to say thank you. Ask them what particular stories they're interested in and see if you can get them more, ask them if they're interested in stories that are evergreen or non time-sensitive that they could turn into a feature or opinion piece.

If you're working with a story that you worry may be misrepresented, be picky about who you send it to. Not every press release has to go out to every outlet in the country. If it's a sensitive topic, go

with a journalist who has faithfully recreated your press releases in the past. Maybe offer them an exclusive.

To keep track of these relationships, keep an up-to-date spreadsheet of journalist contacts, split them up by local/regional/national and what format they work in (TV, radio, newspapers, etc) and note when they've ran your story.

Send the press release out two days (or maybe three or four if it's over a weekend/bank holiday) before the embargo lifts (no journalist wants to work up a piece for publication the same day)

Send a heads-up email to your trusted journalists a few days before you send it to them

Get your experts (usually just one or two people who consulted on or were quoted in the press release) lined up, briefed and ready for interview requests for the week of release

### **Some journalists we've worked with who are excellent and love heritage**

Jody Harrison – Herald

Brian Ferguson – National

Alison Campsie – Scotsman and Press & Journal

Libby Brooks – Guardian

Steven McKenzie – BBC

### **Some people who are doing great with press in the sector:**

GUARD

Ness of Brodgar (Sigurd at UHI)

Crookston Castle

### **Go boldly forth!**

Be prepared for things to change – they will likely change your headline

There are some bad actors out there who want clickbait but in my experience, journalists appreciate good stories and the effort you've made to communicate them, and they won't wantonly manipulate the facts if you've laid them out clearly.