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PREPRINTS

A checklist for press officers

INTRODUCTION

A preprint is a version of a scientific manuscript posted on a public server before it is peer-reviewed or published in a journal. Preprints can help scientists share data quickly. However, there has been much debate about the pros and cons of public communications of research in preprints.

Many journals and organisations discourage scientists and press officers from actively seeking publicity for scientific research at the preprint stage and before peer review. However, there are occasions, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, where academics see benefits of public access to data before it has been peer-reviewed. In some cases, this has led to early access to valuable information. In other cases, scientists later found publicised preprint findings were incorrect, causing public confusion and misinformation.

It is vital for press officers and communications professionals to think very carefully before deciding to publicise preprints, whether via the media, social media or any other channel.

This document does not provide a rulebook for communicating preprints. Instead, it highlights critical considerations.

CONSIDERATIONS

Policy

Does your organisation or team have a policy for the communication of preprints? A policy does not have to be a rigid set of rules; it can highlight the need to work on a case-by-case basis. Your policy will ensure all staff know the relevant processes and who the decision-makers are. For example, the approach could state that publicity of preprints should be discouraged unless there are exceptional circumstances when a senior member of staff makes the decision. A policy does not have to be a lengthy document; a few bullet points can ensure all staff are on the same page.

Decision making

Who makes decisions about publicising preprints? Is a decision-making process clearly stated in your policy?

When it comes to decision making, involving senior staff will be necessary due to the potential for reputation damage. Suppose the research featured in a preprint has errors or limitations the scientists did not explain. In that case, it is likely the 'blame' for publicising inaccurate or over-hyped research will fall on your organisation. Reputation risk is one reason why waiting to promote peer-reviewed science can be beneficial. The checks and balances provided by peer review mean that reputational damage from any inaccuracies is shared between the academics, journal, reviewers and your organisation, and so will be less acute.

In addition to knowing who makes the decisions, it is essential to understand how they will decide whether to publicise a preprint. A simple framework that allows you to discuss the benefits and risks will be sufficient.

Benefits

What is the benefit of publicising at the preprint stage, rather than waiting?

Who benefits from the preprint publicity, and does this outweigh the risks?

Risks

How well known are the research team responsible for the data? What do you know about the quality of their work?

What is the likelihood of peer review identifying errors and limitations?

Is the topic controversial or complex - would peer review or an embargoed release to coincide with publication in a journal help journalists write more balanced articles?

Could coverage be limited if journalists are not confident in the results presented?

What would be the impact of errors in the research? (consider reputational risk to the author and institution, public trust in science and broader societal impacts or harm)

Could communicating a preprint reduce media coverage at the publication stage (as the research isn't seen as new)

Could public communication jeopardise future publication in a journal? Some journals say prior media coverage may affect publication decisions.

Internal communications

Are all staff aware of how your organisation works with preprints? Do all staff know what preprints are and how to identify them? Internal communication is not limited to communications teams. In academic and scientific organisations, all staff should understand what preprints are and communication policies related to them. You could create a short Q&A that helps staff understand how the communications team would deal with a request to publicise a preprint, for example.

External communications

As peer review has been around for hundreds of years, it is easy for the public to find information about scientific quality and trust. Equally, we should do all we can to explain what preprints are to the public so that they can make informed decisions about how they view or interpret what they read.

It is beneficial to have a standard statement that you use to explain preprints in simple language. It may also help to have a publicly available Q&A sheet that answers common questions about preprints.

If you are publicising research from a preprint, clearly stating that the research is not published in a scientific journal or reviewed ensures the public knows which stage the study has reached. Remember that this clarity is needed on all channels, from Twitter to broadcast media. This clear statement will help to safeguard against hype or exaggeration.

You may consider asking an expert who is not involved in the research to comment on the preprint (methods, limitations etc.). They can provide an independent view to help guide your communications.

Reactive

Do you have a crisis plan in case things go wrong? If a preprint attracts publicity without agreement from the communications team, how would you respond? If the research in a preprint is inaccurate, what would you do?

Some journalists regularly scan preprint servers for stories, so there is a risk of a story being picked up by the media or discussed on social media, even if it is not released to the press or public by you or your team.

Some academics may also inadvertently discuss a preprint with a journalist without your involvement.

It is worth spending time to think about possible scenarios that could occur and planning your response. You can prepare in advance by drafting actions that you would take alongside example messages and a list of key stakeholders and audiences.

Know your journals

Different scientific journals have different policies towards preprints and their communication. Checking the journal's policy can help inform your decision-making.

Wikipedia has a handy list of journals by preprint policy here:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_academic_journals_by_preprint_policy

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