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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 such as Research Square, SSRN or medRxiv before it has been peer-reviewed or published in a journal. It differs from an uncorrected proof, which some journals now publish on acceptance and which will have been peer-reviewed.

Preprints can help scientists share data quickly, and for many, they have become a common (but optional) part of the process of research dissemination and publication. However, there has been much debate about when and whether preprints should be publicised.

Preprints are long-established in some fields such as computer science and physics. But they are newer to areas such as life and medical sciences, and decisions on their communication need to be taken very carefully.

Many journals and organisations discourage scientists and press officers from actively seeking publicity for scientific research at the preprint stage and before peer review, particularly if the manuscript is under review. There are situations in which the science is moving at a rapid pace, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, where there may be clear benefit to giving the public access to data before it has been peer-reviewed to allow informed decision-making. However, there have been situations where scientists later found that publicised preprint findings were incorrect, causing public confusion and misinformation.

While scientists may choose to share their preprints with their peers, it is vital for press officers and communications professionals to think very carefully before deciding to publicise preprints more widely, 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.

Preprint norms in the UK: journals, universities and media outlets

A general pattern of behaviour has emerged over recent years:

Most of the major **journals** ask that authors don't actively seek publicity at preprint stage and instead wait for peer-reviewed publication. Different scientific journals have different policies towards preprints and their communication, and checking the journal's policy can help inform your decision-making. If in doubt, you can contact its press office to discuss.

Most **journalists** at UK news outlets are not in the habit of seeking out preprints, preferring the safety net of peer review in a reliable journal. Most also much prefer embargoed stories over immediate release (immediate release is the default for preprints). However, there are certain outlets, such as New Scientist, which do look out for and report on preprints and their stories sometimes lead to subsequent mainstream media coverage.

As a general rule, UK **universities and research institutions** do not routinely issue press releases on preprints. There are several reasons for this:

- The preprint hasn't yet undergone peer review – if there are significant errors that only get noticed later, this could harm public understanding of the science, risks the spread of misinformation, and could be damaging to the reputations of the academics, their institutions and their communications offices.
- It often goes against the preference of the journal and might impact how the peer-reviewed paper is handled by the journal.
- If the preprint gets media attention – even if it is only from one or two outlets – it's less likely to get the coverage it deserves when it's published in a journal.
- A press release for a preprint can't legitimately be embargoed as the study is already in the public domain. This means journalists will have less time to cover it well. Many journalists ignore press releases issued for immediate release.

Some press officers say it helps to know that the 'norm' at other institutions is that publicising preprints is the exception and not the rule – especially when faced with pressure from a pushy or excitable author!

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, such as a head of department or faculty, authorises 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 is strongly encouraged due to the potential for reputational 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. The checks and balances provided by peer review mean that, in the event of inaccuracies in published papers, any reputational damage is shared between the academics, the journal, peer 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? Do you anticipate significant harm done by holding off until publication? Who benefits from the preprint publicity, and does this outweigh the risks?

Risks

How well-respected is the research team responsible for the data? What do you know about the quality of its work?

Revisions after peer review and editing are a normal part of science. Could peer review reveal errors and limitations? What would be the impact of errors in the research? (Consider the reputational risk to the author and institution, public trust in science, and broader societal impacts or harm.)

Is the topic controversial or complex - would peer review, then an embargoed release to coincide with publication in a journal, help journalists report the findings more accurately? Could coverage be limited if journalists are not confident in the results presented or if they aren't given the benefit of an embargo period?

Could communicating a preprint reduce media coverage at the publication stage, as the research is no longer seen as 'new'? Many journals say prior media coverage would make them less likely to amplify the research with their own press release.

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



Internal communications

Are all relevant staff aware of how your organisation works with preprints, and do they know the difference between preprints and published research? This may be particularly important for more junior departmental communications staff, to whom researchers may turn if their institutional communications team declines to publicise a preprint.

Internal communication is not limited to communications teams. In academic and scientific organisations, all staff should understand what preprints are and be aware of 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. Some press officers say an internal document helps when an academic asks for or expects publicity for their preprint.



External communications

Journalists say they don't generally want to write up preprints and that they prefer to wait to cover the research after peer review, but if preprints are actively publicised to them it forces their hand. The decisions of press officers therefore make all the difference!

If you decide that a preprint *cannot* wait for peer review and the benefits outweigh the risks, at the very least you should clearly state in any external communications: (1) that the research is not published in a scientific journal or peer-reviewed; and (2) why the research is being publicised now. It may be beneficial to have a standard statement that you use to explain preprints in simple language. Remember that this clarity is needed on all channels, from social media 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 – particularly the relevant head of department or faculty – 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 the research in a preprint is inaccurate, what would you do? Would you remove the press release from your website, or add a correction?

If a preprint attracts publicity without agreement from the communications team, how would you respond? A few journalists regularly scan preprint servers for stories, so there is a small 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 discuss a preprint with a journalist without your involvement.

It is worth taking 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.

One option to consider is asking the researchers to decline to comment on their study until it has been peer-reviewed – however, this carries significant risk that the research will still be reported, but without their input. Note that most journals permit researchers to discuss their work if contacted in cases where publicity has not been actively courted.

This guide has been produced for Stempra, a UK-based network for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics PR and communications professionals. We care about the quality of communication in science and want to support our members in negotiating the balance between encouraging public interest in STEM subjects, and retaining balance and accuracy. Our aim is for everyone involved in science public relations and press work to have the requisite skills, professional knowledge and recognition, and ethical guidance to do this.

Stempra is run by a voluntary committee of science communication professionals from around the UK, operating under the constitution that has been approved by the membership.

For more information, please visit our website or social media pages.

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And a special mention of the late **Rob Dawson,** former Chair of Stempra, for all his work on the original version of this document.

Edition 02 | November 2026

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