

Ancient Warfare and the News Media

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Abstract: The public relies on news media to learn of discoveries about ancient warfare, whether from archaeological explorations of military sites or from academic research. This paper explores the world of print, broadcast and Internet media in the UK and USA. The author calls for greater care in preparing press releases for publication and forethought about how the journalists might use them. Guidance is offered on how to collaborate with journalists based on the author's experience of working in the profession.

Introduction

Think about the last time you learned about a scientific discovery or an archaeological find. Where did you get your news? It is likely to have been a story on a news app or social media, but it may have been from a report in a newspaper or a magazine, on the radio or television. The media have an important role in making the public aware of developments in the study of ancient warfare. I have been the news editor of *Ancient Warfare* since 2011, and I have appeared on television and radio in the UK and USA talking about commanders, campaigns and conflicts of the past. My subject here is how news of ancient warfare reaches the consumer via the media. I cover four interrelated themes: (1) What the media consider to be news. (2) How the media process news stories. (3) Sensationalism in reporting on archaeology or historical research. (4) Tips for working with journalists in general and *Ancient Warfare* magazine in particular. Though the paper discusses the news media in the UK and USA, the insights presented here will apply equally to media in other countries and in other languages.¹

¹ This is an expanded version of the paper I presented at Warfare in the Ancient World International Conference (WAWIC) on 13 June 2024. I would like to thank Jasper Oorthuys, editor-in-chief of Karwansaray Publishers, for his help in preparing this article for publication.

What is News?

Part of the definition of news is new. The *Oxford Dictionary of English* defines news as ‘Newly received or noteworthy information, especially about recent events.’ An archaeological find or an academic discovery may be intrinsically newsworthy. An archaeologist might have found evidence of a previously unknown kind of armour; or a military historian might have conceived a new theory that explains a battle tactic not previously understood; or a papyrologist might have discovered in a museum collection a previously unknown letter penned by Alexander the Great. Potentially these are all newsworthy—with caveats—but that is no assurance that any of them will make the news. How, then, does this story get to be reported in the media?

Reporting news is a process with several different routes (channels) to reach the reader or viewer (Fig. 1). It may start with you, as the informant or source, having a casual conversation with a guy at a bar who turns out to be a journalist or who knows one and relays the message. It might be an item posted on social media. Many academics, institutions, archaeologists and other organisations use Facebook, Threads or X (formerly Twitter) to announce new findings in the course of their work. Notably the Egyptian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities and the Israeli Antiquities Authority both post on Facebook. In most cases that ‘noteworthy information’ arrives in the journalist’s inbox as a press release.

According to 2024 *State of the Media Report*, ‘press releases are the number-one resource journalists rely on to generate ideas for stories.’² A press release—sometimes called a media release or news release—is an official statement intended to provide information to the news media. Originating with the informant, it is considered a primary source. A press release typically comprises a headline, sub-heading, dateline, introduction, body, quotations from named individuals, and boilerplate about the issuing organisation. The piece ends with a press contact name and email address, along with supporting material, such as a link to a repository with downloadable digital images. Press releases are usually served to news media by email or via a website as a downloadable text document (.docx or HTML) or as a PDF. At its option, the source may require that the journalist observes a ‘do not use before time’, called a ‘news embargo’. Additionally, the source may negotiate with a single news organisation for an ‘exclusive’, meaning journalists at other outlets will have to wait until the preferred news outlet publishes the ‘scoop’.

It is entirely feasible for the academic source or independent scholar to write the press release, since the informant has all the facts and knows the background to

² Cision 2024.



the story and appreciates its significance. However, there is an art to composing the text for it to be ‘ready-to-use’ by a journalist, meaning the text (or copy) can be reproduced as is or with edits for style or content. This can be best prepared by a professional, third-party public relations (PR) agency, which charges for its work—by project or by billable hours or by being retained by a client for an agreed fee (retainer), for which they make their services available as and when the client needs them. Most heritage organisations, museums and universities have a communications department, which is employed by the institution expressly to work with the media. A member of the department would meet with the informant to be briefed on the matter and to collect the relevant information. Based on that briefing, a first draft would be written. It would go through revision levels, the informant amending statements as needed, and then pass an approval process to ensure accuracy and legality of any claims before being deemed ‘final’. The communications department can arrange for photography using a professional to create beauty shots—in a studio or on-location—of artefacts or places in resolutions and formats suitable for reproduction, whether in a printed magazine or on a website. They will also provide captions, noting copyright ownership and photographer’s name where required. They can create videos, GIFs, PDFs, and interactive media to augment the press release. The communications department’s other key function is to distribute this final news release.

Before a press release is sent out a PR agency or communications department of an organisation will compile a shortlist of target media to contact. They will keep and manage a database of publications (pubs) and their editors, journalist and specialist reporters, often underpinned by personal relationships established over years. They will email the press release to named individuals in the print, broadcast and internet media. They will frequently follow-up the distribution with a ‘phone call to offer an interview with the source. They will field inquiries as they arise and will work with the original informant to answer questions in a timely fashion. In news reporting, speed of response matters.

Recent years have seen the rise of professional news distribution service providers who maintain extensive databases, and across all media types. Many communications departments at museums and universities now use companies like Agility PR, Business Wire, Cision, EIN Presswire or Eurekalert rather than execute the distribution activity themselves. Business Wire claims to be able to reach over 100,000 media outlets in more than 160 countries across 200 vertical market categories, including Associated Press, Dow Jones, Reuters, Refinitiv, Agence France-Presse, and Bloomberg, as well as offering visibility in search engines. They typically make their money by selling service packages—EIN Presswire currently offers a basic tier for one press release in one country to one target market, an enhanced tier for 5+2 releases,



and a premium tier for 25 releases, each priced according to service package. These platforms offer scale in terms of multi-channel coverage, speed in dissemination, and reports for clients to track success. One advantage of using professional services is these providers maintain PR and communications content planning calendars enabling a source to time an announcement to align with a special event or theme in a magazine, giving the story the best chance of being reported.

A study of the process of news making concluded that ‘Journalists depend on others for much of the information in their stories.’³ Many reporters simply reproduce the press release in its entirety, or edit it to fit space available, or rewrite it to meet a publication’s house style, then byline the piece. Time allowing, some conduct additional research by contacting the original source or by asking other experts to comment on the findings—hence news stories often include remarks from ‘scholars who were not involved with the research.’

The need for news is as great as ever. For the media, a flow of entertaining or informative news stories is a way to keep readers coming back—and renewing subscriptions (subs). In turn, that sustains reader numbers which advertisers look for when making decisions about placing their advertising (ad) budgets. For universities it is essential too, and never more so than now. Nowadays, university faculty staff need to publish their work to meet academic attainment targets, and to achieve career goals and recognition, leading to tenure. All of this is connected to, and exacerbated by, the worsening problem of cuts to education funding. Showcasing the productive work of a university is a way to sustain existing funds, or to attract new sources of funding. Drawing attention to original research, for example to new archaeological finds, is considered essential to ensuring funding for the next season’s dig to train new students.

Opportunities and Challenges in the Media

Just as heritage organisations, museums and universities have been feeling financial pressures, mainstream media in the English language has been undergoing crushing change over the last decade too. By way of some context, the biggest circulation newspapers in the USA in 2023 were the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *New York Post*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and *Los Angeles Times*.⁴ According to data

³ Hertzum 2022.

⁴ Alliance for Audited Media 2023; Majid 2024. Circulation is a count provided by the Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC) or publisher of how many copies of a particular publication are distributed in a given period and may include *gratis* copies as well as paid circulation. It is different from readership, which is larger on the assumption that each copy is read by more than one reader. The National Readership Survey notes that most publications have more than one reader per copy.



collated by the Alliance for Audited Media, the combined average daily print circulation of the 25 biggest circulation daily newspapers in the USA was 2.3 million copies in the six months to September 2023, which was 14⁰% less than the comparable period for the previous year.⁵ Consolidation has seen many regional and small-town titles move to weekly editions, go entirely online, or close down altogether. Rather than employ journalists, many local newspapers feature nationally syndicated columns. The UK had 12 daily newspapers in 2023, the biggest circulations being the tabloids *Sun*, *Metro*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror* and broadsheet *The Sunday Times*; the tally was reduced by one with the announcement that the London-centric *Evening Standard* would cease printing its daily tabloid from May 2024.⁶ Several regionals, like the *Birmingham Post*, *The Scotsman* and *South Wales Echo* sustain circulations beyond London. Foreign pubs with editions in the English language—like *Der Spiegel*, *El Pais*, *Haaretz*, *Hürriyet Daily News*, *Jerusalem Post*—regularly report on archaeological discoveries in their own countries. These all represent opportunities to publish news of discoveries in the sciences and humanities.

Traffic to news publisher websites has been taking up some of the readership that is no longer buying a printed newspaper. Online subscriptions to the *New York Times* have risen and, because of the Amazon Kindle connection, *Washington Post* has also recovered some of its lost readers. In a successful and innovative funding model, *The Guardian* appeals directly to readers of its webpages for donations rather than placing its articles behind a paywall.

Nevertheless, the industry is facing declining circulations in both print and digital formats. The *Newspapers Fact Sheet* of 10 November 2023 states that in the USA:

An estimated 20.9 million print and digital newspapers were in daily circulation for both weekday and Sunday editions. This is down 8 percent and 10 percent respectively from 2021.⁷

Some of the traffic to news sites is coming via redirects from stories posted on social media channels like X, Facebook or Threads through deals negotiated with news organisations. News produced by Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) using OpenAI's ChatGPT application is another vector of disruption in the industry already grappling with technology-driven change.

⁵ Majid 2024.

⁶ Tobitt / Majid 2024.

⁷ Pew Research 2023.



Compared to daily newspapers, ‘special interest’ history and archaeology magazines appear with different frequencies (table 1). Readers typically collect and keep issues for later reference, meaning they also have a longer shelf-life compared to newspapers. In assessments of market size by value, most research companies classify history and archaeology magazines under the catchall segment ‘Other Periodicals’, making an objective, definitive number difficult to determine. The entire US market for all magazines and periodicals is estimated to be worth \$40.1 billion in 2024 but declined 1.5% over the previous five years.⁸ It represents about 73% of the total market for print newspapers and magazines in the USA. Forecasters anticipate the market to decline further by single digits over the next five years.⁹ Remarkably, subscriptions and sales of print magazines and periodical have now fallen behind digital media platforms.¹⁰

The sub-segment of history and archaeology magazines is not monolithic. The largest circulations are published by institutions, such as *Smithsonian Magazine* from the Smithsonian Institution, *Archaeology* from the Archaeological Institute of America, and *Biblical Archaeology Review* from the Biblical Archaeology Society. Some publications, such as *All About History* and *BBC History*, serve the general history buff with easy to read, highly illustrated content in monthly editions. Other bi-monthly publications serve readers interested in particular aspects or time periods, such as *Ancient Warfare*, *Military Heritage*, *Military History*, or *Strategy and Tactics*, which may require the reader to have more background knowledge of the subject. These special interest publications offer feature articles in both short and long form with specially commissioned art and photography and, in many cases, *news! Archaeology*, which runs to 68 pages, features no fewer than 12 pages of news in its Digs & Discoveries section. As well as publishing the bi-monthly *National Geographic History* (part of Disney Publishing Worldwide) has made a success of publishing standalone editions on specific topics—ranging from ‘The Most Influential Figures of Ancient History’ (with Caesar Augustus on the cover) to the Dead Sea Scrolls. These bookazines, which are a hybrid between a book and a magazine running to around 100-pages, build on National Geographic’s long-established brand and reputation for high-quality photography, maps and writing; priced at \$14.99 a copy, they are often placed at the supermarket checkout to encourage impulse purchase. *History Extra* (‘from the makers of *BBC History Revealed*’) has published its own bookazines,

⁸ IbisWorld 2024a. Market research company Statista, May 2024 (Statista 2024a) forecasts the US market for print newspapers and magazines to reach \$24.65bn in 2024, which is a number greatly at odds with the IbisWorld number.

⁹ Statista 2024 (Statista 2024a) notes ‘the anticipated annual growth rate (CAGR 2024–2029) is -3.17%, leading to a projected market volume of US\$20.98bn by 2029.’ See note 3.

¹⁰ IbisWorld 2024a.



including *Your Essential Guide to the Roman Empire*, retailed at £7.99. These editions do not have news sections.

While magazines are still sold in bookstores, newsagents/newsstands (fig. 2), grocery stores and chemists/pharmacies, online sales now account for almost half of publishing revenue.¹¹ Available as single issues from retailers at full price, publishers entice readers with discount price offers to encourage subscribing to the title, hoping to build a long-term relationship with the reader—hence those annoying reply cards inserted into every issue. Without a distribution middleman and his take of the cover price, there is more net revenue left for the publisher, even with the discount and shipping costs. The extra margin is much needed. The profit from publishing magazines and periodicals in the US is now as little as 7.3%.¹² Hikes in production and distribution costs are factors in the low return. The paper market experienced many challenges during the Covid-19 Pandemic, ranging from a reduction in production, supply chain issues, and requirements to manufacture certain types of products over others (such as shipping cartons). The price of paper increased 9.7% in 2021, 12.8% in 2022 and more again in 2023.¹³ Publishers raise the cover price of their magazines with great reluctance, acutely aware that it makes them less affordable to some readers and risks negatively impacting circulations.

Occasionally, a history-related story makes it on to the airways, whether on radio or television. More often than not the story will break on local channels first, and then be picked up by the nationals. NBC, CBS, ABC, Fox and Fox News are the most watched networks in the USA.¹⁴ BBC1, ITV1, BBC2, Channel 4 and Channel 5 are the most watched networks in the UK.¹⁵ Each channel has one or more newscasts daily. The decision to cover a story is the responsibility of the news team and whether it is broadcast at all may come down to the volume of news on that particular day; a report of an archaeological discovery may be bumped last minute for ‘breaking news’. ‘Slow news days’ generally tend to favour cultural news stories. After broadcasting the story, the clip may re-appear on the broadcaster’s website along with a text version based on an edited transcript. It may also have an afterlife as a video on YouTube. Where the radio or TV broadcast may be fleeting, these internet media can preserve the story indefinitely. In what is perhaps a missed opportunity, it is surprising that subscription channels like History (formerly History Channel) and History Hit TV do not carry a regular news programme with updates on archaeological digs or historical research.

¹¹ IbisWorld 2024a.

¹² IbisWorld 2024a.

¹³ IbisWorld 2024b.

¹⁴ Stoll 2024.

¹⁵ BARB 2024.



Advertising is vital to the business model underpinning the news media, but advertisers have moved rapidly away from print to digital. The *Newspapers Fact Sheet* notes for the USA:

The total estimated advertising revenue for the newspaper industry in 2022 was \$9.8 billion. This is down 5% from 2021, a slight drop. Digital advertising accounted for 48% of newspaper advertising revenue in 2022, based on this analysis of publicly traded newspaper companies. This follows a steady increase from 17% in 2011.¹⁶

Advertisers now have a choice of whether to spend their marketing communications (marcom) budget on print, broadcast or digital media or a blend of them. The trend has been unrelentingly towards digital. Websites offer marcom executives greater granularity in audience selection. The audience for factual content is very large. According to Statista, Smithsonian Institution alone received 169,550,000 unique visitors to their website in 2023, about the same number for each of the previous five years.¹⁷ It is also diffuse.

On the website, banner ads, welcome ads or skyscraper ads, can be served to specific demographics and at particular times of day, or if this is beyond the budget, the publisher can offer the advertiser run of site at a lower cost per reader to stretch the marcom budget further. Combined with Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) to increase visibility in Google, Bing, Yahoo! and other search engines, and social media, a marketing campaign can be designed to serve advertisements anywhere the target customer is—when reading the print copy, or on a mobile device, or via a web browser—not forgetting the email inbox, where advertising is embedded in the obligatory newsletter. Publications like *Ancient Warfare* and *History Today* also run blogs on their websites to augment their print product. Independent authors of blogs writing about archaeology or history may attract advertising too, among them *Ancient Origins*, *Ancient Pages* and *Following Hadrian*. Several podcasters serve listeners in the ancient history space, taking their inspiration from BBC Radio 4's *In Our Time* with Melvyn Bragg. Podcasts from *Ancient Warfare*, *Ancient History*, and *History Extra* tie in with the magazines of the same name. The independently produced *History of Rome*, *The Life of Caesar*, *The History Network*, and *The Partial Historians* are hosted by historians talking about their favourite subjects. Many podcasts feature interviews with guest archaeologists, historians and writers. As audiences for podcasts have grown, inserting ads from sponsors in the recording has become a lucrative business too. One study concludes that 'marketers acknowledge that podcast hosts are

¹⁶ Pew Research 2023.

¹⁷ Statista 2024b.



becoming trusted influencers with loyal communities, offering greater opportunity for consumer engagement and positive brand outcomes.¹⁸ Online-only competitors, like *Live Science* (part of Future US Inc.), offer targeted advertising opportunities but may leave less money with the traditional print and broadcast media companies to pay for staff and operating expenses who cover news.¹⁹

Sensationalism and News Reporting

It helps scholars and heritage organisations that archaeology and history, and its subset ancient warfare, are popular with the public. Documentaries and fact-based programmes—like PBS’s *Secrets of the Dead*, UK Channel 4’s *Time Team* (now fan-funded) or BBC’s *Digging for Britain*—show the public’s genuine fascination with the past. The interest goes well beyond the UK and USA:

Archaeology is a regular feature in daily life and popular culture. Possessors of a widely recognized, positively valued and well underpinned brand, archaeologists need to take more seriously the appeal of their work.²⁰

Many archaeologists already do. Alice Roberts and Phil Harding have become familiar faces on British TV, while Darius Arya and Kevin Dicus regularly appear as ‘talking heads’ on ancient history documentaries in the USA, and military historians Adrian Goldsworthy and Richard A. Gabriel often appear to explain finds as they relate to ancient warfare. The appeal of new discoveries is noted in the *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology*:

National and international media are interested in disseminating any archaeological search or discovery that may capture the interest of a larger audience; usually the stories are already familiar tales of the past, or the finds are significant enough to catch the attention of those unfamiliar with the history of the site.²¹

Engaging the public through mass communication leading to a greater understanding of research processes and results—not just to explain the facts and theories produced by science—is an essential endeavour that has been called ‘Science in Public’.²²

The great temptation to a source or to a reporter is to exaggerate the significance of new discoveries. Scientists have conducted experiments to study how ordinary people react to sensationalism. The participants in one web-based

¹⁸ Brinson / Lemon 2022.

¹⁹ Newman 2024.

²⁰ Holtorf 2007.

²¹ Schablitsky 2020.

²² Gregory / Miller 2000.



experiment could watch a maximum of 16 news stories that varied in content (neutral versus negative stories) and packaging (standard versus tabloid stories). The researchers concluded that, ‘In all, the truism about sensationalism as a guarantee for success appears to be largely true,’ albeit with the caveat, ‘but not completely.’²³ It is an issue the profession recognises. With a microphone thrust in their faces, archaeologists, curators, conservators, historians or experts of any discipline may be put on the spot to announce untested theories about the significance of their latest finds. To get attention, press release writers frequently hype their stories using emotive, attention-grabbing phrases like ‘sensational’ and ‘a find that will rewrite history’. In the process, nuance and accuracy is lost, theories are taken as facts, potentially damaging the integrity of the scholarship and leading to the public being misled. Issuing a press release without, for example, peer reviewing claims first or not clearly stating the findings and their limitations in general terms, ‘can result in scientifically weak, sensational narratives being presented to the public.’²⁴ This is not a desirable outcome for any party.

Sensationalism in the news should be a matter of concern to all of us who care about reporting on ancient warfare! Incensed by the growing problem, in a post on Roman Army Talk, Jona Lendering (who was the co-founder of Livius Onderwijs (Livius.org) and founding editor of *Ancient History*), wrote:

Every month we can read them: reports about sensational archaeological discoveries. Often, the news is so sensational, that it is immediately clear that the aim of the press release is to generate publicity and raise funds.²⁵

Jona proposed an award to ‘create some awareness about misleading press coverage.’ His objective was:

To ‘encourage’ this type of creative writing, the Castle of Aemstel prize will be awarded to the archaeologists who have best succeeded in misinforming the press. It is called after a fake discovery in Amsterdam in 1994.²⁶

Yes, it was intended as a joke; but Jona has a point. We all have to do better. My plea to scholars and scientists is, *do not sensationalise your work!*

Industry best practices help sources with stories to observe guardrails. Discussing Cultural Resource Management (CRM), Robert D. Kuhn provides

²³ Hendriks Vettehen / Kleemans 2018.

²⁴ Snoddy *et al* 2020.

²⁵ Lendering 2006.

²⁶ Lendering 2006.



recommendations to encourage improved media coverage of archaeology, which include:

increased recognition of the importance of press coverage; increased efforts to encourage positive press coverage of CRM; improved skills for working with the press; greater participation from archaeologists in academia; and continued evaluation and assessment of newspaper and media coverage of CRM archaeology.²⁷

These could equally apply to other specialisations. I hope this paper contributes to a better understanding of the media among professionals working in heritage organisations, museums and universities as well as independent scholars.

There *are* good examples which demonstrate how institutions can work with media to the benefit of both. I cite three examples:

(1) In 2020 Museum und Park Kalkriese near Osnabrück in Germany unveiled the *lorica segmentata* recovered from the adjacent battle site in 2018. During conservation it was discovered that the armour was the most complete articulated, segmented plate armour ever found and, dated to the first decade of the first century CE, it was also the earliest. The communications team prepared an official news release (a downloadable PDF in German) with colour images, produced a high-quality video ('Projekt Schienenpanzer') which it posted on YouTube, provided a reconstruction drawing by illustrator and swordsman Roland Warzecha (AKA Dimicator), and held a well-attended event to reveal the armour to the world's press.²⁸ How the armour was extracted from the site, examined using XXL-CT imaging technology at Fraunhofer-Institut and then conserved, was almost as fascinating as the find itself, not least that the initial determination of its construction had to be revised when the pieces were re-assembled. The result was extensive national and international coverage across all media in 2020. In 2024 the *lorica* was a featured artefact in the acclaimed 'Legion' exhibition at The British Museum, which included images of it in its own media kit and generated additional publicity for VARUSSCHLACHT im Osnabrücker Land gGmbH, which operates the museum and archaeological park.

(2) In May 2021 a 'carved stone depicting a mystery horseman' was uncovered by volunteer archaeologists working at Vindolanda Roman Fort near Hadrian's Wall in England. The communications team at Vindolanda Trust prepared an official news release (in English) with colour images of the photogenic artefact and produced a high-

²⁷ Kuhn 2002.

²⁸ Museum und Park Kalkriese 2020.



quality video ('Carved Stone Discovery') which it posted on YouTube.²⁹ The result was national coverage across print, broadcast and Internet media.

(3) In 2023 a 'lump of a soft mysterious purple substance' was found within the grounds of Carlisle Cricket Club in the remains of a Roman bathhouse associated with Emperor Septimius Severus and his campaign of 208-211 CE. The find was identified as Tyrian Purple, an exceedingly rare find and possibly the only specimen to survive in this form from the Roman period. The communications team at the local authority prepared a press release with a colour photograph.³⁰ The story was picked up by national and international print, broadcast and Internet media. The site was featured in BBC's *Digging for Britain*.

A fourth case study is more problematic: (4) In 1992, archaeologists working at Vindolanda discovered a well-preserved 16 cm-long wooden object. Its initial identification was a darning tool. However, other potential applications were suggested. One team determined that it was a phallus—perhaps used as “a projecting component (of a herm, statue or building), a pestle, or a sexual implement”—and published their paper explaining their reasoning in the journal *Antiquity: A Review of World Archaeology* in 2023.³¹ Newcastle University and University College Dublin each prepared a news release quoting the authors of the paper.³² Reports quickly appeared in the international media focusing on the object as a dildo, citing experts who had not contributed to the paper for their opinion. Any nuance in explaining the use of phalluses in the Ancient World tended to be lost in the sensational reportage favouring the Roman sex toy theory.

How to Work with Journalists

In this final segment, I want to help scholars and heritage organisations to be better prepared to work with the media. As discussed above, there is an array of channels through which a source can get their story out to the public (fig. 1). I personally have worked on both sides of the desk: for three decades I was a product marketer trying to get publicity for my branded products, and in parallel I was an editor looking for great stories to share with my readers at *Ancient Warfare* and its sister *Ancient History* magazine. Based on my experiences, I present here my twelve tips for enabling a source with a story idea to collaborate with the media:

²⁹ Vindolanda 2021.

³⁰ Cumberland Council 2024.

³¹ Collins / Sands 2023.

³² Newcastle University 2023 and University College Dublin 2023.



(1) Consider the purpose and the timing of the communication

The process begins with inward reflection. The source of a story should consider what information they want to share with the public; why they want to share it; what they seek to achieve by publicising it; what the research means to the audience; and who needs to know about it. Answering them honestly will determine the timing of a news release, as well as its structure and content.

(2) Find media experts

If the source works at a heritage organisation or museum, or study in a university, discussing the story idea with the institution's press or media relations department first is crucial. Their mission is to promote the work of the institution and, by doing so, burnish its reputation. As specialists, they know how to work with media, they how to prepare a press pack, they have authority to edit the organisation's webpages, and they can set up and manage interviews with journalists. They probably have a budget for expenses like professional photography or can assist in making video content with intros and outros. If the source is an independent scholar, they should be ready to do the outreach themselves or consider appointing a publicist to work on their behalf.

(3) Think like a journalist

The source may believe that the newest discovery is great news for them and their field, but this may not necessarily be a subject that is considered news by an editor. A journalist on the editorial team will pick the story they want to run because, in their professional judgement, it will appeal to their readers, listeners or viewers. For publication or broadcast, the story may be reported in a way that is quite different than the source had intended. Worth noting is the fact that, even in scientific publications, there are now fewer specialists reviewing contributions, so 'first cuts' are often made by non-specialists.

(4) Remember the photo editor

To increase a story's appeal to a prospective journalist, the source should be sure to provide compelling photographs; a great photo might make the difference between a story being reported or not. If the story is about a new finding, the source should include images in different resolutions—lower resolution (72 dots per inch or DPI) for online news and webzines, high resolution (300 DPI) for reproduction in newspapers and colour magazines. Consider including maps and diagrams such as reconstructions—like the Kalkriese team did with their *lorica* find—and a chronology of key dates, which a graphic artist could turn into a sidebar. All of these media elements help the journalist to tell the story.



(5) Identify ‘best-fit’ media

Create a ‘media list’, a roster of targets. Review all media: national and local TV, print and online publications, and radio, as well as bloggers and podcasters. It is highly likely that the source’s press department has a contract with one of the professional news distribution service providers who maintain databases across all media types. To help the press relations manager, the source should research media outlets and try to match up their own interests with the interests of a specific journalist. The larger outlets often have a journalist assigned to report on archaeology or history. Identifying those who are interested in what the source has to say will raise the chances of getting the story published. The source should be clear about whether the story is being offered as an exclusive or if any time embargo applies to its release.

(6) Let Journalists Know in Advance

Consider the journalist’s deadline *before* making contact. Publications variously go to print on a daily, weekly, monthly or bimonthly schedule. Online reporting is real time for many titles. Giving a journalist a few days’ notice is good practice, especially for print media with long form articles. The journalist may want to talk to people who have opinions on the issues raised by the source’s research. TV documentaries require a storyboard and a script. A researcher for the production company may approach a talent agency (like Past Preservers) or publishers or institutions to find suitable subject matter experts to appear in the show.

(7) Communicate in plain English

US newspapers are generally written at the *reading level of eleventh grader, that is a 16- to 17-year-old*. That means using short words and short sentences to clearly communicate your message in the press release. The writer of the press release should try not to overwhelm the journalist with wordy pitches or long emails which take paragraphs to deliver the point of the story. Good rules are ‘get to the point’ and ‘stick to the facts.’ Be objective and avoid hype in the messaging: do *not* use expressions like ‘sensational’, ‘rewrite history books’, or ‘unique find’ (when it really is not). The text of the release should clearly separate facts from speculations and hypotheses. In a TV or radio interview, a spokesperson should use a conversational style but beware of talking down to the audience. The interviewee should beware of inadvertently relating an archaeological or historical find to some modern-day analogy without first thinking through its suitability or implications. The interviewee should speak with the public in mind. In documentaries, interviews with experts (‘talking heads’), recorded on location or in studio, are slotted in at predetermined spots in the narrative in post-



production. While this may allow the expert more time to tell the story, interviews are typically heavily edited at the producer's discretion for the final broadcast.

(8) Consider 'News Values'

Journalists know their readers. They are drawn to a story that, at least to them, looks new and different. This is called 'news value'. In choosing what to report, journalists consider values such as timeliness, familiarity, unexpectedness, meaningfulness and personalisation, among others. A case in point, *Live Science* explains its editorial standards within the context of its mission of providing 'timely coverage of science that is fascinating, important and relevant to readers' lives' as well as seeking 'to correct misconceptions, debunk widely circulating myths and clarify confusion online.'³³ While the story might not be new or revelatory to the source as an academic, yet it might intrigue a journalist precisely because it is not widely known to the public. That will entice the reader to know more. This partly explains why articles about discoveries made, or artefacts found, years ago frequently re-appear in online articles of 'Top 10s'. The accuracy of published ancient warfare news depends on the reporter's willingness to take the necessary care in collaborating with the source. This is particularly important when reporting on complex issues or concepts that could be easily misunderstood or distorted by the journalist and consequently misinterpreted by the consumers of the news story.

(9) Check 'Print Editorial Calenders'

The source should align their schedule with their target publications' editorial calenders. Magazines, like *Ancient Warfare* and *Smithsonian*, publish editions around particular themes or special issues: checking their editorial page or media kit if they have one is advisable. These editorial calenders may be scheduled up to a year in advance to allow advertisers to plan their ad spends and insertions. Rather than a news article, a publication may commission a feature article to cover the story for the special issue. For mass media, like daily newspapers and TV, aim for a quiet or 'slow news' day when journalists are more likely to be receptive to story ideas.

(10) Take 'Media Training'

Media training will help an informant gain confidence in engaging with the media. Indeed, an informant really should refrain from accepting an interview on live radio or television without first receiving media training. Hearing how one sounds and seeing how one looks on a recording for the first time can be a genuine surprise.

³³ Live Science 2023.



During the radio interview, the source should talk into the microphone; on TV, the source should look at the reporter, not at the camera. Appearance and demeanour bring authority and energy to the interview. The interviewee should be enthusiastic, natural and authentic, but keep responses short, stay calm, try not to rock side to side, move around or fidget. Anticipating questions and having prepared answers ready really helps reduce the stress of live or recorded interviews.

(11) Build Relationships with Journalists

Success in having a story published or reported may lead to the source being contacted again if something new comes up in the field. Journalists want new stories and contacts. Experts unconnected with the study being reported are often contacted to give an independent perspective to the news story. A good practice is to build relationships with journalists.

(12) Reach out to the Media

Sources should track media to follow what it is being reported on in an area of interest. A subject matter expert may have perceived something in the reported news that is inaccurate or has been sensationalised to a point where academic integrity is jeopardised. This represents an opportunity to contact the journalist who wrote the original piece, by email or 'phone, to try and correct the erroneous information. There is also the Letters to the Editor section where the informant can critique an article in a previous issue of a publication: brevity and clarity are key in this context. The source may receive a follow-up call to give an expert quote in a later story.

To bring this short survey of working with the media to a conclusion, consider the role of *Ancient Warfare* magazine in this special interest market niche. I have been acting news editor of *Ancient Warfare* for thirteen years. From Zutphen in The Netherlands, we publish editions in print and as digital PDFs in English and our circulations in both formats are growing steadily. Podcasts, produced in conjunction with *The History Network*, add value to the published content, taking discussion of ancient warfare to a much larger audience than just those who purchase the magazine. Every two months, we release an edition of the magazine, each with 4 pages dedicated to news out of a total of 58 pages. We aim for six to seven stories of around 250 words per article. Many of those report on academic research; space permitting, we often include a QRcode embedded with a URL to take the reader directly to the original research paper as published. As *Ancient Warfare* is renowned for its rich, visual content, each story needs to be accompanied by a photo. We are looking for news that fits with our mission of writing about 'Military history from the dawn of



civilization to 500 AD.’³⁴ If that is what you have, please remember to include us in your news release distribution plan when you want the world to know about it. Contact the *Ancient Warfare* editorial team via the publisher’s webpage at: <https://www.karwansaraypublishers.com/en-us/pages/contact-ancient-warfare>.

Conclusions

News media have an important role to play in informing the public about the past. Heritage organisations, museums, universities and independent scholars have much to gain by providing journalists with stories. Newsworthiness does not mean abandoning the normal guardrails of scholarly study, however. Explaining the context, sticking to the known facts, making clear what are hypotheses or speculations, and fairly assessing the true significance of new insights, all help to promote an accurate reporting of research findings. Beware of claims of the spectacular: using emotionally loaded words and hyping the importance of stories distorts reporting, erodes trust, and reduces the space for finds that truly merit the moniker.

Understanding the past by showing how it actually was for the people of the time, with all of the context, complexity, conflicts and contradictions of real life, is the driving motivation of historians. By bringing the latest discoveries to an interested public, the reporting that journalists do serves the work of historians and students of ancient warfare. We are spokespersons, in effect witnesses, for the deceased who cannot tell their stories themselves. In the courthouse scene in *Requiem for a Nun* one of the characters says, ‘The past is never dead. It’s not even past’.³⁵ I would add that the news helps keep it alive and in the present.

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³⁴ Ancient Warfare 2024.

³⁵ Faulkner 1950: Stevens to Temple in Act 1.



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Figures and Tables

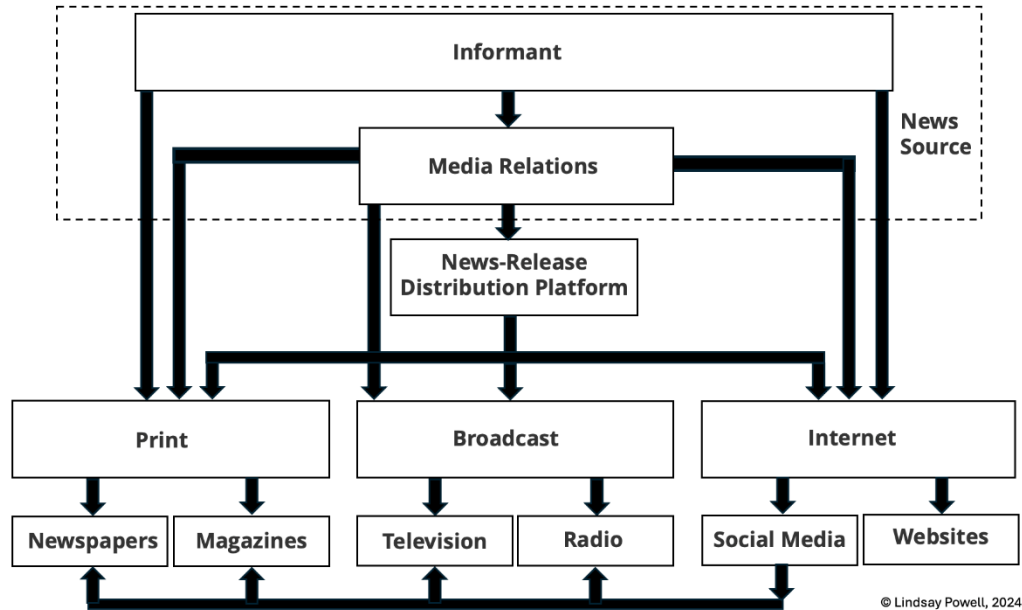


Fig. 1. Simplified graphic representation of the movement of a press release through the news media ecosystem.



Fig. 2: History magazines at WHSmith in Wokingham, England. (Photo taken by the author in March 2024).



Title	Circulation	Frequency	Publisher
<i>Smithsonian Magazine</i>	1,258,570	Monthly	Smithsonian Institution
<i>National Geographic History</i>	574,520	Bi-monthly	Disney Publishing Worldwide
<i>Archaeology</i>	188,536	Bi-monthly	Archaeological Institute of America
<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>	127,411	Quarterly	Biblical Archaeology Society
<i>BBC History</i>	76,001	Monthly	Immediate Media Company
<i>All About History</i> *	40,000	Monthly	Future PLC
<i>History Today</i> *	17,100	Monthly	History Today Limited
<i>Ancient Warfare</i>	10,000	Bi-monthly	Karwansaray Publishers
<i>The Historians Magazine</i>	2,000	Bi-monthly	The Historians Magazine

Sources: Alliance for Audited Media, 2023; Publisher's websites/media kits. Notes: * 2019

Table 1: Circulations of English-language Archaeology and History Magazines in 2023.

