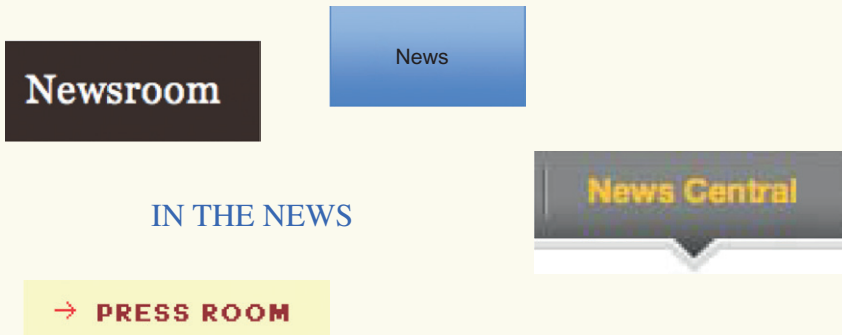


INTERLUDE 3 The New Life of Press Releases



The Internet has radically changed the audiences, life span, distribution, and uses of press releases; but press releases haven't changed to meet the needs of web users. They should.

If your web site includes news briefs in any of their various forms – press releases, news items, announcements – this interlude is for you.

The old life of press releases

A typical press release is one or two pages about a key event, key person, new results, or new information. Press releases were originally designed to get information to newspaper and broadcast reporters with the hope that they would feature the news that day – or in their next edition or next broadcast.

Newspapers, magazines, radio, and TV are still there – now online as well as in print or voice or visually. And reporters still need press releases. But...

The new life of press releases

Reporters are often now writing for the web – not for paper. And the press release doesn't just go to reporters. It's posted on the organization's web site. It lives on, having many uses other than serving reporters. Consider the many differences between the life of a typical press release ten years ago and now.

	Old world: Print and broadcast	New world: Web
Audience	Media people: journalists and reporters	Everyone!
Life span	One day? Less? May be filed for future use	Forever!
Distribution	Sent only to specific people	Available through home pages and search engines – including external search engines
Use	Often expanded by talking to a media relations specialist and other people	As a summary, fact sheet, or basic information, either standing alone or linked to more details elsewhere on the web site

You – or others – may link to your press release from blogs, tweets, Facebook walls, Google+ posts, and other social media. You would probably be happy if online curators call attention to your press release. Your entire press release as you wrote it may show up on other web sites – and could stay there even if you archive it or take it down on your site.

In fact, the SEO of your site is likely to increase the more others link to your press releases. All of that good attention brings you many more site visitors who are not reporters. It brings you ordinary people who don’t think of what they get to as “press release” or even “news story.” They think of it as “information” and expect it to look like other web-based information.

Let me tell you several real-life stories about that.

How do people use press releases on the web?

Story 1: Press release as summary

The new life of press releases hit home to me when I was usability testing a web site meant for researchers and research librarians. The first scenario went something like this: “You have heard that researchers at ... just released a new report on ... and you want to see what they have to say on that topic.”

Include your plans for press releases and other news in your content strategy. Will you leave them up forever? Move them off the site after two years? Put them in a section called Archive after one year?

The client and I thought that participants would look for the new report. Some did. But half first clicked on the tab for Press. One said, “I always look for a press release first. A good press release summarizes the key findings. Then I’ll decide if I really want the report.”

Great idea. At the time, however, the press releases on this web site were just copies of paper documents. They didn’t even link to the full report. They do now!

Story 2: Press release as fact sheet

In another usability test – this time of a health information site for the general public – some people searched, and old news items (press releases) showed up in the search results. Several participants chose a link to a press release, without realizing that’s what it was.

Because they weren’t reporters, they didn’t recognize that what they got was a press release. They assumed it was a fact sheet. For them, it was simply information on the topic they were interested in.

They wondered why the pages didn’t look like other pages on the web site. They complained about the lack of headings and the wall-to-wall text that are still common in press releases.

Participants also assumed that the contact name on the web page was the researcher. Again, because they weren’t familiar with press releases and were using the pages as information, they didn’t realize the name was a media contact. And the press release page just gave a name and phone number – not a title or department.

Story 3: Press release as basic information

In a third project, I was helping a web team do a content inventory of what they had available on each of the main topics the site covers. To everyone’s surprise, most of the information was in old press releases. But with long paragraphs and no headings, they weren’t serving well as web content.

Link press releases and other news to relevant information on the web site – full reports, pages about people, other information you have on the topic, and so on.

Include a date on all press releases, including the year. The press release may still be on the web site next year or even two years from now.

In deciding whose name(s) should be on the press release, think about both the short-term and long-term life it will have. Give titles and departments as well as names.



What are your press releases like? How well do they serve as summaries for the public? As fact sheets? As basic information? How well do they fit into the look and feel of your site? How well do they work as web writing?

Story 4: The press call up

I once had several reporters as participants in a usability test. They all said they had no time or patience for trying to use the organization's web site. They knew whom to call. *They* were not reading news on the web site.

So perhaps the news section of your web site isn't primarily for reporters. Maybe it is for all your *other* site visitors who will expect what they find to be like other articles on the web site – with lots of headings, key message first, short paragraphs, bulleted lists, and so on.

What should we do?

Write for the web. Think about visuals as well as words. Plan for mobile and social media.

Write for the web

Write press releases with all your site visitors and the “forever” web life span in mind. Move from the typical press release style in the left column of this table to the web-based information style in the right column.


Many press releases have great headlines – key message bites. It's what happens after the headline that concerns me most.


Typical press release	Web-based information
No date, or date with no year	Full date including year, with month spelled out so date is not ambiguous
No headings after the headline	Broken into sections with well-written, bold headings
Long paragraphs	Very short paragraphs, bulleted lists, tables, graphics, videos, audio
No links	Links to full report, additional information, other relevant pages on the site, relevant people
Full page, looks like a paper document	Fits into the template of other information topics on the site
Name and phone number of media relations specialists, often without saying who they are	Names, titles, departments for each person; links to email or information about that person


Think about visuals as well as words


Everything is online. Every newspaper and magazine has an online presence. Every radio station has a web site. Today's news isn't only in words or voice – and television isn't the only visual outlet for news.

Make your news visual, too. Figure Interlude 3-1 shows how the U.S. National Science Foundation makes its news stories visual. Almost every story has at least one picture. Many have several. Some have video, too.

 Key message statement
= good bite as headline

 One added sentence
= a good snack

 The full date with the year
acknowledges the long life
of online news.

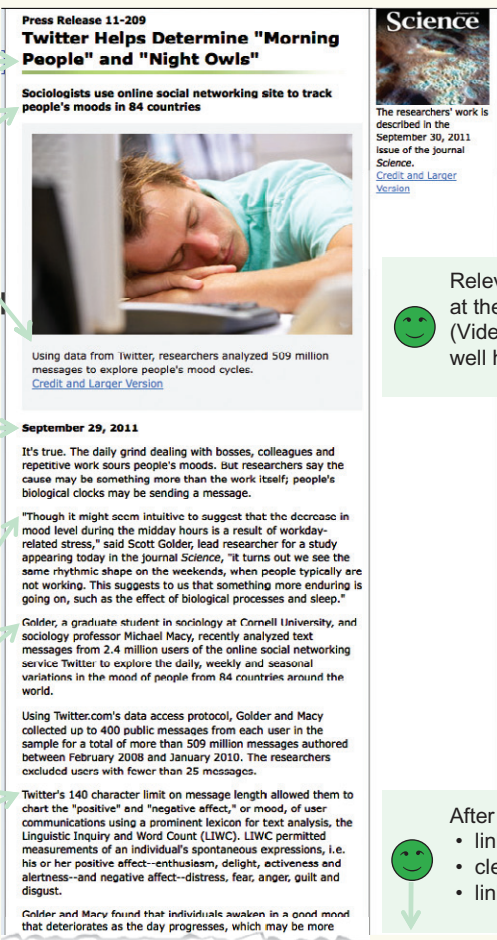
 But then 20 paragraphs
with no headings.
Headings would help
Perhaps:

**People have the same
cycle all week**

**Data came from 2.4
million users, 84 countries**

**Text analysis shows
people's moods**

and so on



Press Release 11-209
Twitter Helps Determine "Morning People" and "Night Owls"

Sociologists use online social networking site to track people's moods in 84 countries

Using data from Twitter, researchers analyzed 509 million messages to explore people's mood cycles.
[Credit and Larger Version](#)

September 29, 2011

It's true. The daily grind dealing with bosses, colleagues and repetitive work sours people's moods. But researchers say the cause may be something more than the work itself; people's biological clocks may be sending a message.


"Though it might seem intuitive to suggest that the decrease in mood level during the midday hours is a result of workday-related stress," said Scott Golder, lead researcher for a study appearing today in the journal *Science*, "it turns out we see the same rhythmic shape on the weekends, when people typically are not working. This suggests to us that something more enduring is going on, such as the effect of biological processes and sleep."


Golder, a graduate student in sociology at Cornell University, and sociology professor Michael Macy, recently analyzed text messages from 2.4 million users of the online social networking service Twitter to explore the daily, weekly and seasonal variations in the mood of people from 84 countries around the world.

Using Twitter.com's data access protocol, Golder and Macy collected up to 400 public messages from each user in the sample for a total of more than 509 million messages authored between February 2008 and January 2010. The researchers excluded users with fewer than 25 messages.

Twitter's 140 character limit on message length allowed them to chart the "positive" and "negative affect," or mood, of user communications using a prominent lexicon for text analysis, the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC). LIWC permitted measurements of an individual's spontaneous expressions, i.e. his or her positive affect—enthusiasm, delight, excitement and alertness—and negative affect—distress, fear, anger, guilt and disgust.

Golder and Macy found that individuals awaken in a good mood that deteriorates as the day progresses, which may be more

 Relevant color images
at the top relieve the text.
(Videos and audio files work
well here, too.)

 After the article, you find

- links to relevant people
- clear info on who they are
- links to relevant information

Figure Interlude 3-1 Think more about how your news looks and works on the web.
www.nsf.gov

Plan for mobile and social media

Your news is likely to show up on mobile and in social media – either because you posted it there or because someone else did. Plan for that from the beginning. Think “bite, snack, meal.” Figure Interlude 3-2 shows a good use of social media leading to a news story.



Figure Interlude 3-2 Think about how your headline, opening sentence, and visuals will work in Twitter, Facebook, and other social media.

www.sciencealert.com.au

Does it make a difference?

Yes. A client and I tested different styles. We took a press release that had all the features in the table under “typical” and redrafted it to have the features under “web-based information.” We included it as just one of several situations we were looking at in a usability test.

In one scenario during the usability test, participants got to a press release that we had not changed. In another scenario, they got to the one we had changed. (The two were on different topics but were similar in length and level of detail. Both were information based on studies that researchers in the organization had done. Both came up as primary choices when people searched for their respective topics. So both were acting as fact sheets.)

Many participants noticed and commented spontaneously on the difference. Their comments were in favor of the one we had changed.



At the end of the session, we pointed out the two examples again and asked for a preference. All but one of the 16 participants preferred the one with headings and links – the one that was much more like good web writing. The only participant who differed said, "I always print the web pages I want."