

The media release

...a guide to writing your own



AS A MEANS for organisations to distribute information, the media release is an artefact of the old journalism of newspapers, print magazines, radio and TV that continues in the era of online media. It is old and perhaps a little tired, but it has not yet expired.

Characteristics of a media release:

- it is no longer than one side, or at most one and a half A4 pages
- it carries a letterhead with the organisation's name, website, Australian Business Number (if a formal organisation) and contact information (so that writers can check that it is a bona-fide organisation and not two teenagers with an email account), a 'media release' heading and a release date
- the release focuses on only a single main point
- it is written with short sentences
- only one idea per short paragraph
- preferably, the release includes quotes from a single news source
- the most important message is placed in the opening paragraphs
- it avoids jargon, technical terms and big, less-common words unless aimed at a technical readership
- it carries contact information, especially a telephone number and email address, for a spokesperson who can comment further on its content
- it makes available a clear, in-focus photo with the subject occupying most of the frame.

They are what journalists and bloggers expect to find on a media release.

Writing a media release

For brevity and focus, media releases follow the tradition of the 'inverted pyramid' news writing style. This places your key message in the first couple paragraphs and follows with detail in descending order of importance.

Doing this allows a publication to cut your story from the bottom, were it to merely republish your release, while retaining your main points. It also allows bloggers and journalists to quickly assess the topic, its relevance and its newsworthiness to their publication.

It makes for more lively reading if you provide quotes from a single spokesperson. Writers can use these to enliven their reporting by letting sources speak for themselves.

A media release answers six key questions – the five W's and an H. The closer to the top of your release they go, the better... best of all within the first two or three paragraphs.

The questions you answer are:

- **what** – what is the main topic of your media release? What is it about?
- **when** – when will it happen/did it happen?
- **where** – where will/did it happen?
- **who** – who did/is to do it? Who or what is the person or organisation?
- **why** – why it whatever it is being done/was done? What's the back-story?
- **how** – how will it be/was it done?

This last question for a media release around community gardening might include funding sources and levels, how land was accessed, how community is involved, how it will be managed, how it will benefit the community and offer solutions to issues. Journalists responding to your media release might ask questions about these things.





Be available to comment

As you will include a name, phone number and email for a spokesperson at the end of your media release, ensure that they will be available to respond to enquiries, even after what passes for normal business hours.

Spokespeople should have a thorough knowledge about the subject of the media release and should anticipate the types or questions they might be asked. This includes questions about numbers related to the topic as well as difficult questions. Have evidence you can offer to back up any claims you make.

Remember that it is your organisation's credibility that is at stake. False or misleading information is likely to be exposed by others the blogger or journalist might speak to. Obfuscation, partial and misleading information can damage your organisation's reputation, if exposed.

Those things are for controversial topics and advocacy organisations. Most media releases about community gardening or community food systems will attract writers covering 'human interest' or 'civic affairs' stories. Their questions will usually be milder, asking what will go on in the garden, about funding and how people can join. Even here, though, if there has been opposition to setting up a community garden, spokespeople should anticipate questions about landuse and access.

Receiving a media release

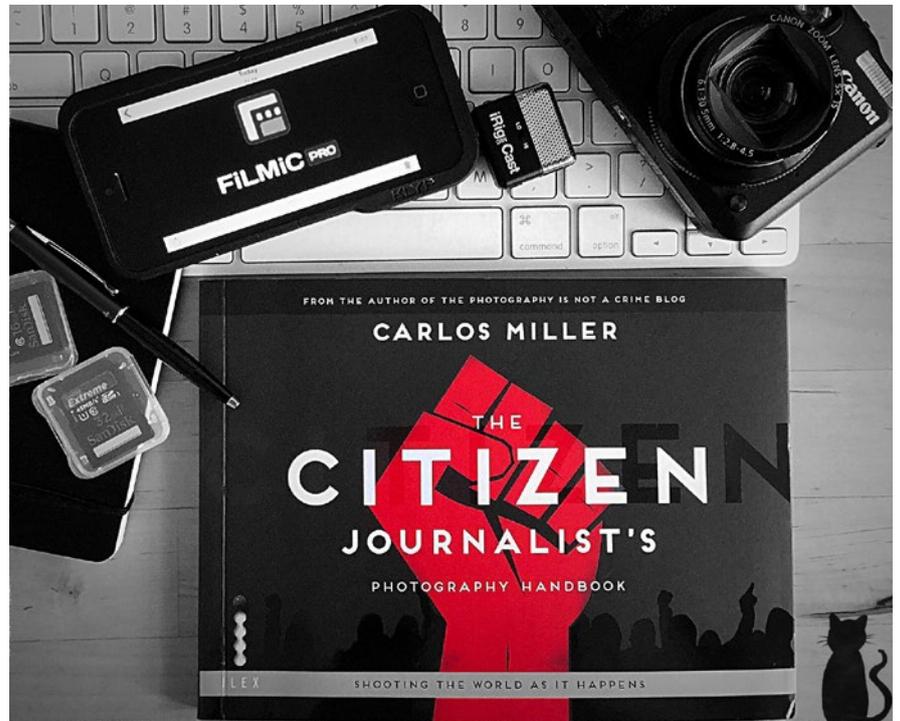
If we receive a media release, how do we, as bloggers and citizen journalists, interpret what it says?

The answer to that is that we exercise our well-honed skepticism. Not our cynicism if we carry any of that around, but a healthy skepticism that seeks evidence of claims and that is ready to ask the opinion of others. Having a constructive skepticism means being ready to ask the issuing organisation for evidence and to comment on differing opinions and facts.

Let's realise that the information provided in a media release:

- may be incomplete, with other points of view being absent
- may present information framed to shine a favourable light on the organisation
- may not relate to the history of the topic.

This is why media releases, or 'press releases' as they were called in the days when old media dominated the land, are best treated as starting points of your story. You would best talk to others who might hold different views of the topic if you are to write a more-rounded story.



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BY WAY OF EXAMPLE

Here's a fictional media release about a new community garden. Our explanations of the structure appear in the righthand column...

Oceanside is to get a new community garden after Oceanside Council approved construction at last night's council meeting.

This succinctly states the main news and answers the 'what' and 'how' questions.

The garden will be built by members of the Lavender Street Community Garden Association in the Lavender Street Park. It will occupy approximately a quarter of the area. Construction is expected to start late next month.

There are two ideas in this paragraph which answers the 'who', 'where', 'when' and another 'how' question. Note the short sentences.

"This is a far-sighted move by council", said Association president, Rosemary Thistle, after the council meeting.

This expands on the 'what' question. Note that in a quote spanning more than one paragraph there are no end-quote marks until the quote fully ends.

"It will put to constructive use part of a neglected city park and bring together people living nearby, creating a sense of place.

"We hope it will be a catalyst for future community gardens in Oceanside".

With the addition of the Lavender Street garden, Oceanside will have a total of three community gardens. Others are located in Oceanside Park and adjacent to the Wattle Street Nature Reserve.

The last sentence anticipates a reader question – fear that a community garden could attract rodents – and offers assurance that the creatures will be discouraged.

Ms Thistle explained that mainly edible plants will be grown in the new garden, however there will also be flowers as they play a role in controlling insect pests.

A water tank will store rainfall for garden irrigation from the roof of the men's shed already in the park and a compost system is to be installed. This will use a rodent-proof design, said Ms Thistle.

"The public will be welcome to visit the garden", said Ms Thistle.

There are no plans to fence-off the garden, which will remain open at all times. Asked of this could lead to vandalism, Ms Thistle said that might happen but the attitude of the community garden association is that this would be the acceptable cost of community gardening in the area. The two existing community gardens in Oceanside report no incidence of vandalism.

This paragraph anticipates and addresses common public concerns about community gardens. Doing this is recommended as a proactive tactic in writing media releases about new community gardens.

The development of the Lavender Street Park site will start with a participatory site assessment by people who have indicated their interest in joining the community garden.

This will be followed by a placemaking activity to figure out where to place elements of the garden such as compost, seating, shelter and garden beds. Construction will follow.

Note the name and phone number at the end. A link could be made to the community garden's website or social media presence. Another could be made to the council website reporting the council minutes for the meeting at which the garden was approved, and to a council media release about the garden, if one exists.

MORE INFORMATION:

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MEDIA RELEASE Date of release 27 February 2014

This is an authentic media release issued by the Network.

The release carries a heading identifying it as such and a date of release.

Look for the key message in the first couple paragraphs, the use of quotes to develop the message and statements normalising the practice of community gardening.

The release was issued on the Network's letterhead as a pdf file so it can be opened in all types of computers. Contact information is listed at the end.

FIND COMMON INTERESTS INSTEAD OF CRITICISING, SAYS NETWORK

Community gardeners have reacted with consternation to AUSVEG's criticisms of the community gardens they use to provide food for their families and to socialise with others in healthy, outdoor recreation.

"It is unfortunate that AUSVEG makes unfounded criticisms of our community gardens and that they applaud the federal government's axing of the community grants scheme that would have benefited not only community gardeners but a range of food-related initiatives", said vice-president of the Australian City Farms & Community Gardens Network (ACFCGN), Jane Mowbray.

"AUSVEG's move appears to be an attempt to drive a wedge between those engaging in community food systems like community gardens and farmers markets, and commercial horticulturists.

"The reality is that many community gardeners are great supporters of Australian farmers and buy their products.

"Like AUSVEG, we are interested in biosecurity too, however the reality is that community gardens have been in existence for decades without being a biosecurity threat to farmers or anyone else because there are often trained horticulturists and experienced gardeners who are members.

"What is interesting is why AUSVEG chose to criticise community gardeners, who grow for their own consumption and not for the market, rather than seek a better deal for Australian horticulturists from the supermarkets and seek safeguards for growers from what could be an influx of imported fruit and vegetables with the proposed free trade deal.

"Australians have a tradition and a right to grow some of the food they eat, whether that's in their own backyard or together with friends in a community garden, and that's exactly what they are doing".

Community gardening has now become so popular that local and state governments have policies to assist people starting and managing the gardens, and churches and schools have become involved and are actively involved in promoting healthy eating nation wide. For decades the gardens have been established features in Australia's towns and cities. The gardens attract a broad demographic, ranging from people in comfortable middle class suburbs, to rural towns and social housing estates.

"While the gardens provide some of the food their members eat, experience shows that they have an important social role as venues where people can come together to work on something of mutual benefit and get to know people living in their area", said Ms Mowbray.

"This valuable social role appears to have been something that AUSVEG is unaware of or that it chooses to ignore.

"We now have community workers making use of community gardens and schools have built them too, but those valuable roles aren't all. Community gardens are great places to learn and it's this learning, and the diversity of gardening knowledge you find among the gardeners, that reduces the incidence of plant disease and pests and makes most gardens well maintained places".

"We're happy to talk about the values of community gardening with AUSVEG", said Ms Mowbray, "and find areas where we can cooperate to further support both commercial horticulturists and community and school gardeners."

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