

# If you must use embargoes, here's how to do it right

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Embargoes - often used by scientific institutions such as medical societies and scientific journals to give access to reporters before material is published - can inspire heated arguments. Some journalists love them, while others say they - along with Ingelfinger Rule, which prohibits pre-publication publicity of results before they appear in a peer-reviewed journal - discourage original reporting [1]. Journals find them helpful in "choreographing" the dance of medical news [2], but some have eschewed them completely [3].

Despite all of this debate, and the fact that embargoes are becoming "less and less practical" [4], in the words of one press officer, they are here to stay, at least for some time.

And as one public relations executive said recently, 'Every manager here has a different set of rules about embargoes' [5].

With that in mind, here are some guidelines for appropriate embargo policies that actually live up to the oft-stated goals of allowing reporters enough time to report stories accurately, while avoiding needless restrictions on the flow of scientific information.

1. **Give a reasonable amount of time.** What's reasonable? That's probably a judgment call, dependent on how complicated the material is, what else is happening in the world, and other factors. Many journals that publish

weekly provide embargoed material about five days before publication, which seems like enough time. And I've suggested that 24 hours should be a minimum, even in our millisecond news cycle world. But one thing's for sure: 38 minutes is not long enough [6].

2. **Don't embargo material that's freely available online.** This might appear obvious. But based on the number of journals and scientific conferences that still try to claim that their online accepted papers, corrected proofs [7], and abstracts are embargoed until some time they determine later, it bears repeating. If it's freely available online, it can't be embargoed. End of story.
3. **Give a specific time for your embargoes.** This doesn't come up very often, but saying that a paper is embargoed for a date isn't enough - you have to also say what time, and in what time zone. Otherwise it will lift 26 times [8] for people in 26 different time zones.
4. **Don't ask everyone to agree to an embargo, then let one news outlet go ahead with a story.** I'm as big a fan of original reporting as the next journalist, but I'm not a fan of backroom side deals. If reporters

have agreed to an embargo on your material, don't then give an exclusive to a paper - say, *The New York Times* [9] - while making everyone else wait to publish.

5. **Don't ask for a quid pro quo.** Lots of press officers believe - perhaps with some proof [10] - that embargoes increase the chance something will be covered. But don't make that coverage a condition of your embargo agreement [11]. Reporters may go to your conference for many reasons, including becoming better-informed about a subject, and never write anything that can be pegged to that conference. Quid pro quo is unseemly, not to mention a journalistic no-no.
6. **Be consistent about sanctions and early embargo lifts.** If someone has agreed to your embargo policy, they should get the same sanctions for breaking it as anyone else does, no matter what outlet they work for. Those sanctions should be clearly spelled out in your embargo policy, and you should avoid the temptation to look the other way for repeated "inadvertent" breaks. And don't blame someone for breaking an embargo if he never agreed to embargoes in the first place. Also: Lift the embargo once the material appears online, whether it's an obscure blogger or a major wire service that broke it. If one reason for embargoes is to level the playing field, then keep the playing field level.
7. **Keep the number of cooks in the kitchen to a minimum.** Nowadays, for many journal studies, there are at least two press releases: one from the journal, and one from the researchers' institution. If the research had an industry sponsor, there may be a third. Conferences can

get even more complicated, and that's where inadvertent breaks can happen. Do your best to minimize those, and confusion.

8. **If other news is coming out within a day or two of yours, move your embargo so they match.** Let's say you're publishing a study on a particular subject, and your embargo lifts on Thursday at 5 p.m. Eastern. You find out that a competing journal is publishing a study on the same subject at 5 p.m. Eastern on Tuesday. Move yours to Tuesday, and let your press list know. If one reason for embargoes is to allow reporters to write better-informed stories, why insist that they only cover your news if they want to publish at the embargo time [12]? Be flexible. Readers will thank you.
9. **Make sure recipients of your "embargoed" emails have actually agreed to an embargo.** Sending something and marking it "embargoed" doesn't mean it actually is [13]. Just because someone agreed to another institution's embargo policy doesn't mean that she agreed to yours. There's nothing stopping her from writing about the story, and she won't have broken any agreements.
10. **Don't try to restrict with whom reporters can speak.** As a number of embargo policies spell out, part of the reason to give journalists time with material before it's published is so that they can seek outside comment. Requiring that reporters not share the material with anyone before the embargo [14] lifts turns them into stenographers [15]. At the very least, it will make people more cynical about the reasons for embargoes.

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