National and local media increasingly play an instrumental role in communicating research. Important research relating to Brexit, Climate Change and COVID-19 have become staple content for national and regional news platforms. Media organisations have an insatiable appetite for new stories and as a result much of the important information within online and traditional media can be ignored due to the fast turnaround in a story. Important links to the authors, funders and the actual paper can be excluded from a new story for a variety of reasons. This Undermines the effective communication of science. This might be due to a lack of information being shared from the point of source, such as news agencies, or regional media churning out short, snappy stories to encourage web clicks (churnalism). If information relating to the research is omitted within a press release, the news desk or other interested parties are less likely to include it. This in turn makes tracking the research using altmetrics much harder to achieve, especially if a unique identifier is not included. In the case of syndicated news this can be highly problematic because if the source story omits information, subsequent coverage is likely to do so as well, due to the copy and paste nature of the web. Despite fact checking being a core skill in the journalism profession, they often do not have the capacity to add missing information that may help create extra attention for an academic or their team, an institution, publication or funder.

We looked at a sample of 488 local news reports linked to The University of Sheffield using data from Altmetric.com. We found that a large proportion of research in local media often cited the journal, but did not cite or link to the actual paper. We also found that in most cases funders were not named in news reports. Over one third of our sample contained broken links, raising questions as to the quality of data being provided to Altmetric.com by its third party media provider. Of the 297 mentions that did have good links, we discovered the majority of the stories cited the journal but did not name or link to the research paper, this was despite the majority being available Open Access by using Unpaywall’s Open Access checking tool. We found that the vast majority of news stories that did not contain a link to a paper were syndicated by the UK national news agency, The Press Association. In comparison we looked at a sample of national media coverage relating to Sheffield and found that most did link to the journal paper, although we did find that Altmetric.com could only provide web-linked evidence to three national news sites due to limitations through a third party provider.

This raises questions about how research is communicated by funders, journals, research media teams and ultimately the media. We propose a checklist for quality media coverage to assist the public understanding of research with links to the actual science, funder and institution. This checklist would benefit librarians, media teams, publishers, funders and the media. The checklist includes, where applicable, authors names, their organisations, funder, journal and citation (including bibliographic and DOI information). Whilst we appreciate that this might be done at a national level by some media organisations and we suggest that research institutions and publishers work closer with news media to highlight the importance of including as much content from the checklist as possible. This aids the discoverability of the research, subsequent news stories and helps track impact and supports the core values of Open Science.