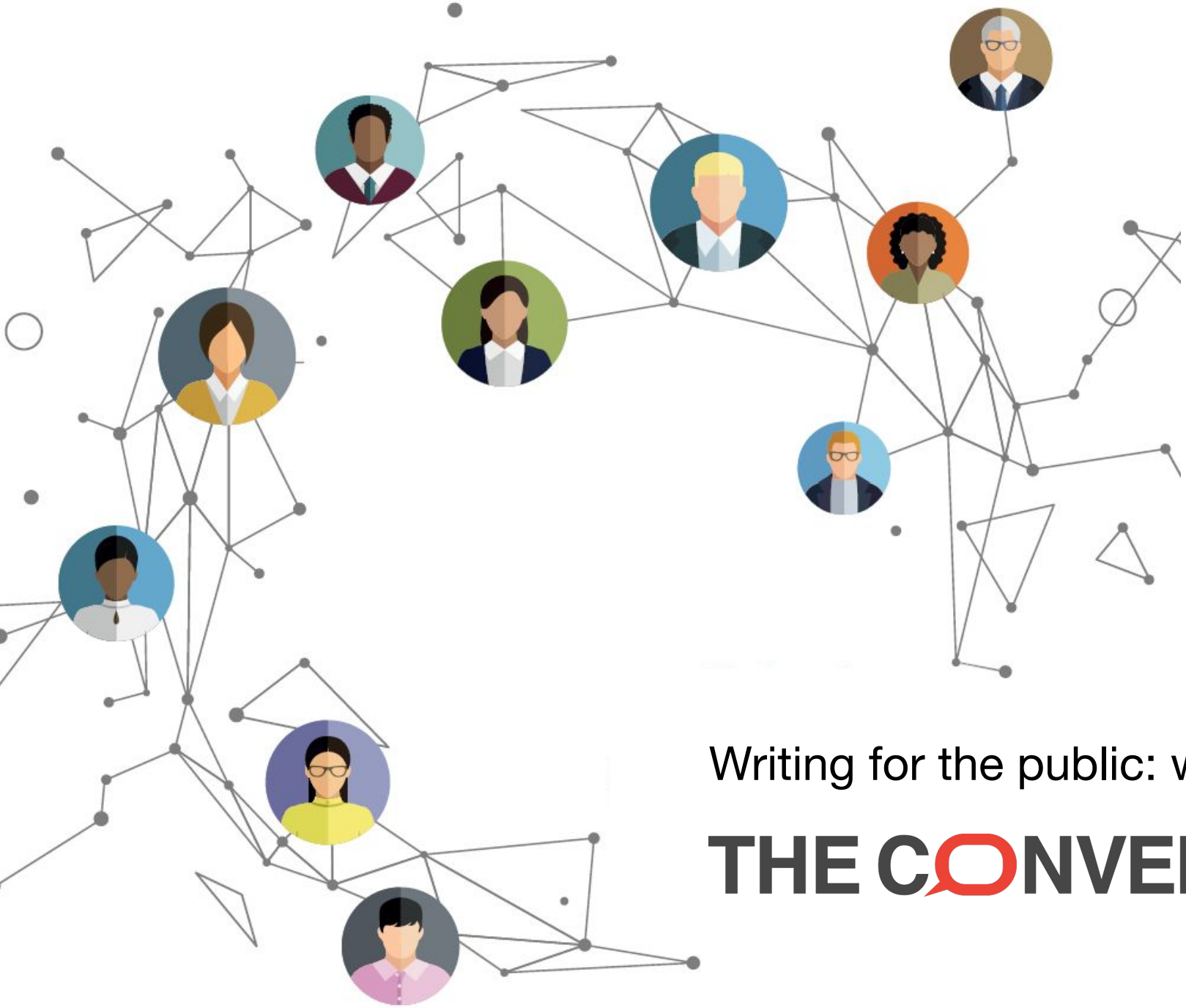


Writing for the public: why and how

THE CONVERSATION

What we do

- **Independent source of news, analysis and expert opinion**, written by academics working with professional journalists

- **Short pieces written quickly**
  On current affairs, new research and topics of interest, 12-24-48hrs

- **We make it easy**
  Editorial support you won't find elsewhere

- **Author approval**
  Pieces must be signed off by the author

- **All content is open access, Creative Commons licensed**
  Free to read, and free for other media to republish

- **Authors get readership metrics**
  Demonstrate readership and engagement with your articles

Why write for the public?

- **They need you!**
  We need experts to counter the noise

- **Journalists are generalists, but academics are specialists.**
  You see topic with depth and clarity that journalists will not

- **Visibility**
  Simply-written pieces flag up your research to other academics, and to a general audience that would never have read the paper anyway

- **Create greater awareness of you and your work**
  Raise the profile of your research group, department, university

- **Develop writing skills**
  That will improve your approach to non-specialist audiences

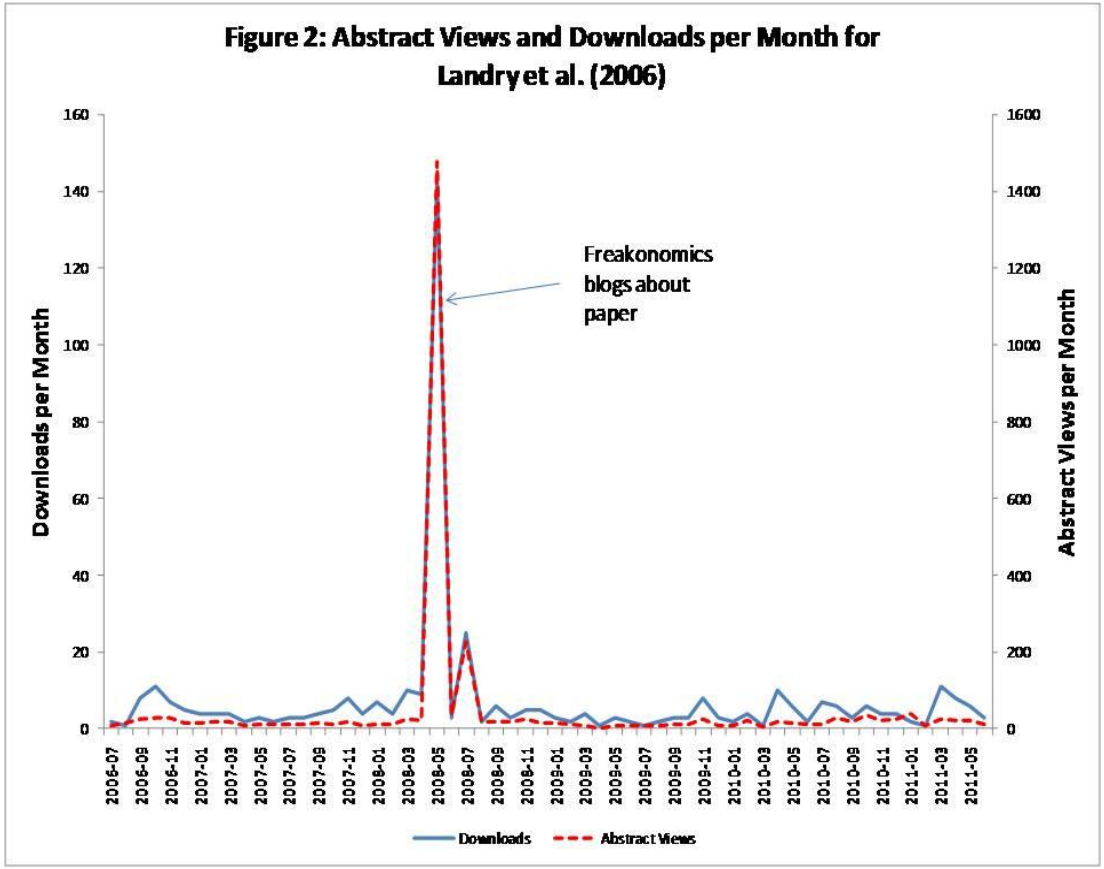
- **Use our readership metrics**
  To support funding grant bids, for example

Audience and impact

- Wider audience **increases the potential for research to generate impact**, especially when original research is paywalled

- Monthly readership:
  3.5m+ unique users to our site
  10m+ readership including content republished elsewhere

- **> 90%** of pieces are republished. Around 85% of our readers are outside the UK/Ireland



From *The Impact of Economics Blogs* (working paper) by David McKenzie (World Bank, BREAD, CEPR, IZA) and Berk Özler (World Bank)

The benefits of visibility

- Conversation articles **cited in parliamentary select committees** on topics such as Brexit, fisheries, human rights, ebola, EU-Russia relations

- York researcher's article on air pollution in African cities republished in Guardian, BBC World Service. **OECD report subsequently cites research** and quotes original Conversation article

- Creates opportunities to **collaborate with other academics**

- Brighton academic's article on earthquake-proof buildings following Nepalese earthquake **led to motion in European Parliament**

- Open University researcher wrote on Flight MH370, invited to Radio 4 Today programme. Had never done media work before, **said experience was "life changing"**.

  Has since written 12 articles, says the exposure has **dramatically increased the attention his research receives**.

The benefits of visibility

Personal opportunities

- Durham PhD's article on space crime scene investigation republished around the world, **invited to NASA**
- Liverpool academic wrote on the fate of black Germans under the Nazis, which **inspired a film**, Ava and Duante
- Child abuse researcher **contacted by survivors**, whose testimony instigates new research project
- Nottingham researcher wrote on university subject choice which saw her paper become **the journal's most-read**. Invited to edit special edition and become reviewing editor
- Hull academic asked to **give TEDx talk**, **invited to write book** for Royal Society of Chemistry.

What makes
a good story?

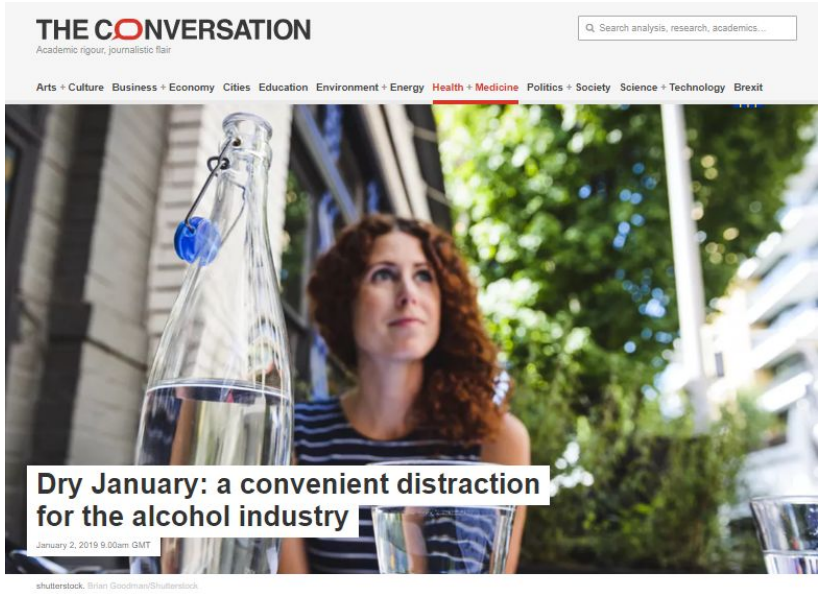
The news value of academic expertise

Good starting points

- **News**: insight/analysis of current affairs, or new angles on current or old stories
- **Research**: discuss your new findings, or comment on other people's research
- **Timeless**: tell an interesting story, answer an interesting question
- **Unusual, surprising, counter-intuitive**
- **Personal stories**, human interest
- **List format**: "Five things you don't know about…", "Ten reasons why…"

Examples: news analysis, comment, opinion

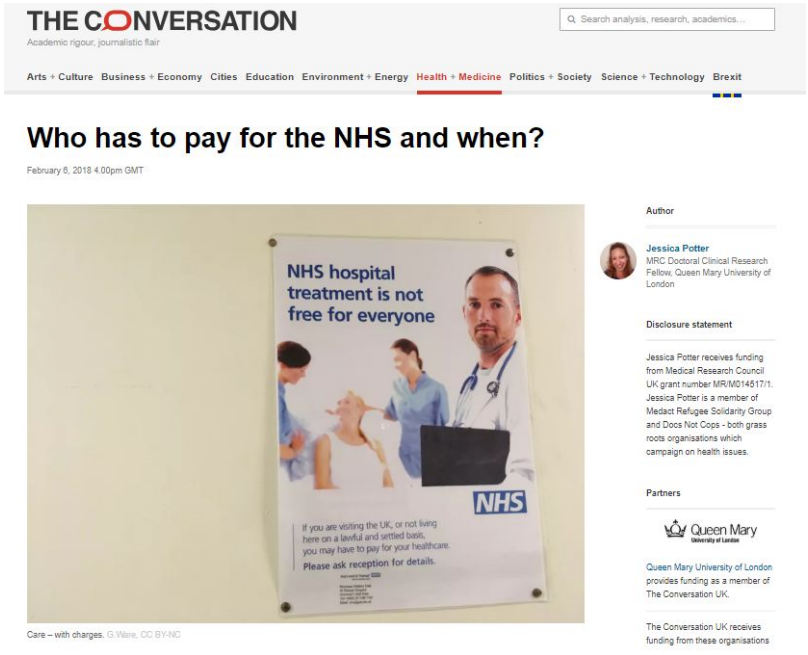
Led by events:
Respond to news stories, events, anniversaries to provide insight into story and its context. Easy to plan in advance. (19,000 reads)



Comment or analysis of topical issues:
Identify a topic, debate or question present in the news and offer greater detail or a new perspective on the issue. (38,000 reads)

Examples: explanation

Answer a question that's in the air:
Use your expertise to help readers understand details behind current debates. (24,000 reads)



Explainers:
A straightforward explanation of, for example, specialist terminology, processes, or current events in greater detail. (44,000 reads)

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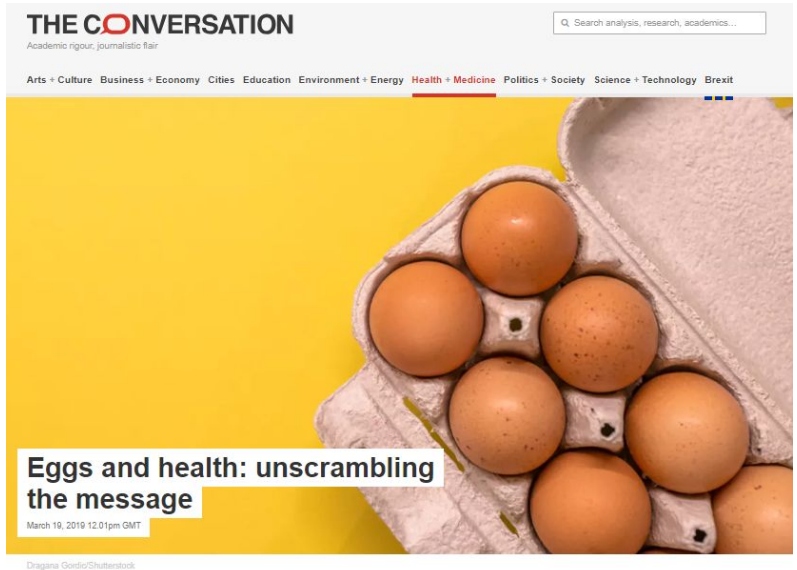
Examples: new research

Topical new research about current events: Research in the area of fast-developing news stories allows authors to introduce new angles and perspectives. (447,000 reads)

Michael Jackson with Wade Robson, then aged five. Channel 4

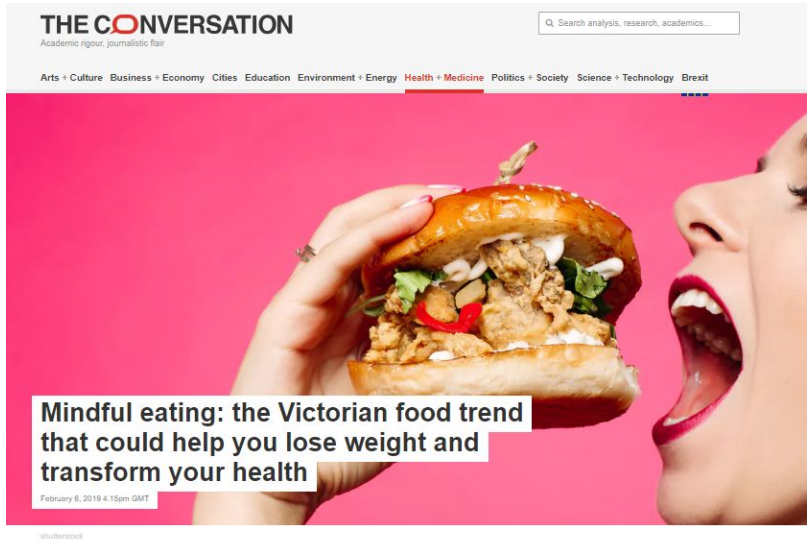
New insights from interesting fields: This introduced new research on the health implications of eating eggs, and how advice had changed over the years. (42,000 reads)



Dragana Gordic/Shutterstock

Examples: new research

Use a news story to introduce your research:
Even quite niche or esoteric research can be given an added sense of relevance by hanging it on a current ‘news peg’. (30,000 reads)



How-tos or expert advice:
Readers are always interested in expert advice based on research findings. (18,000 reads)

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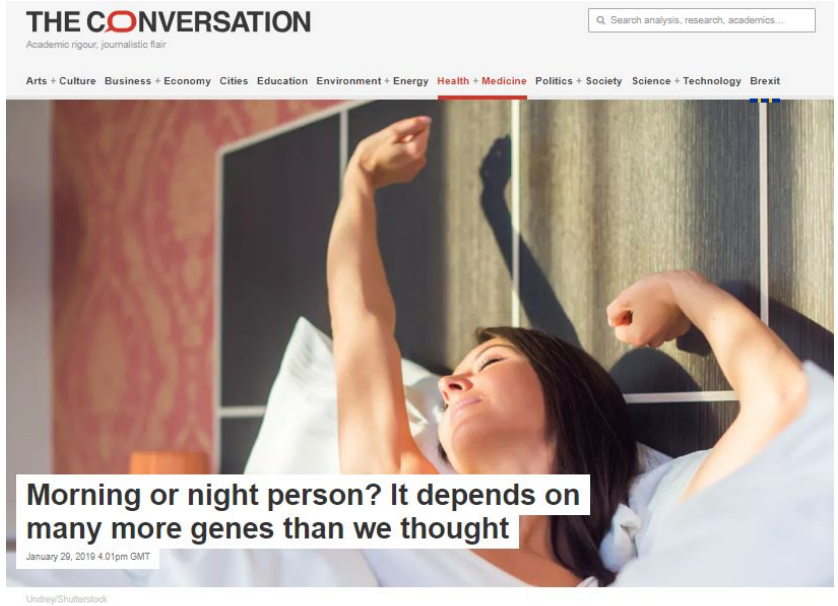
Examples: timeless stories

Tell an interesting story:
Research can lead to uncovering interesting stories that can be told any time. (187,000 reads)

Introduce appealing topic through research:
A piece that uses specific research to introduce a topic and provide a perspective on the present state of affairs. (42,000 reads)



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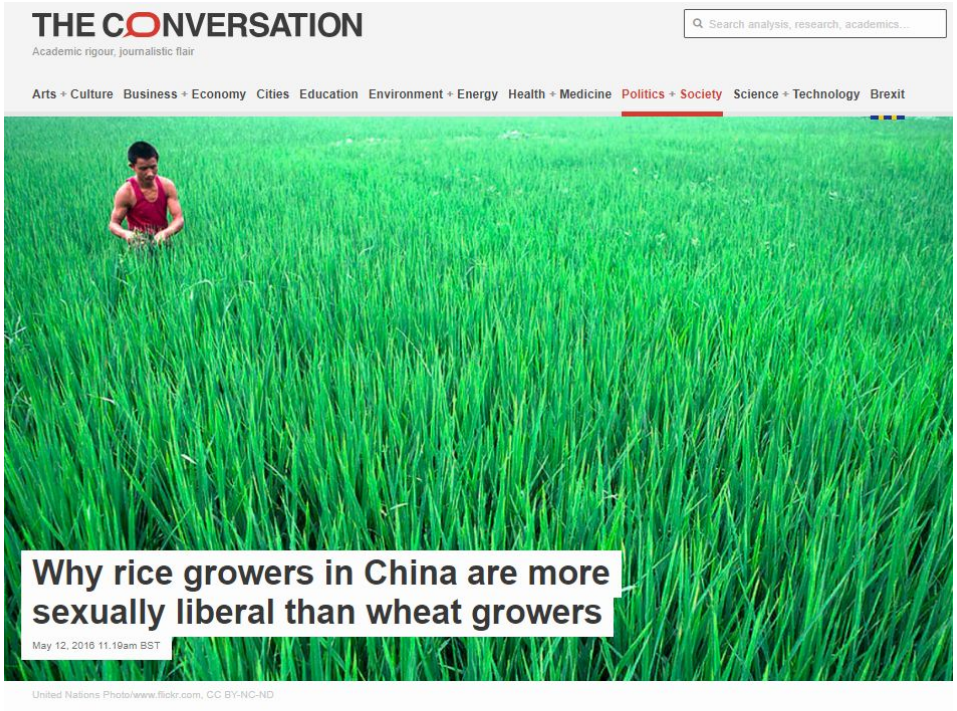
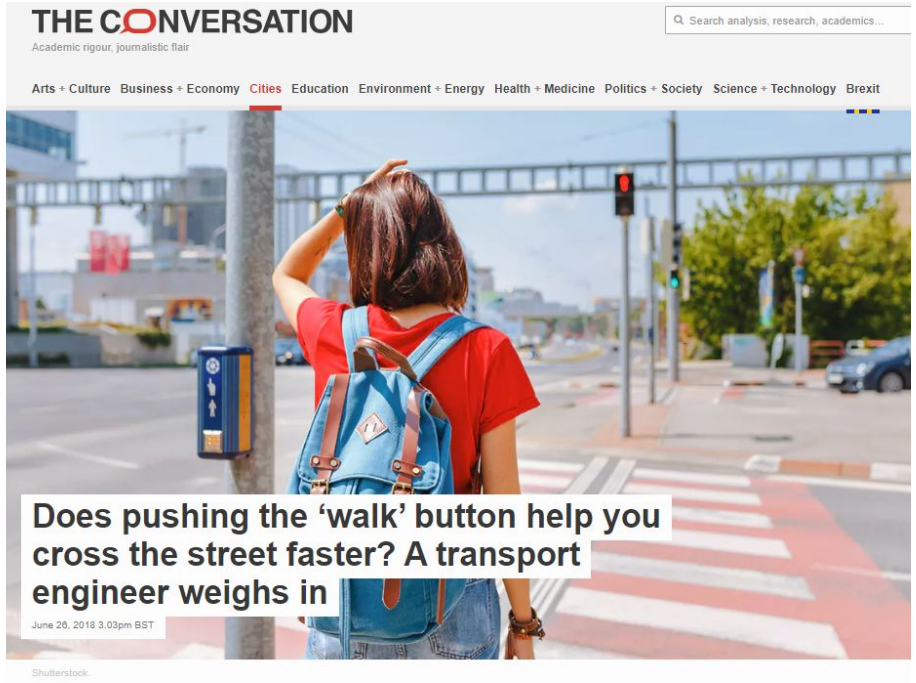
Examples: quirky, unusual, counterintuitive

Using an odd and attention-grabbing trend as the headline, this piece unpicks social survey data to explain the cultural trends behind it. (19,000 reads)



Pose a head-scratching question that may have occurred to others and use specialist expertise to answer it. Best with questions that have unpredictable answers. (167,000 reads)



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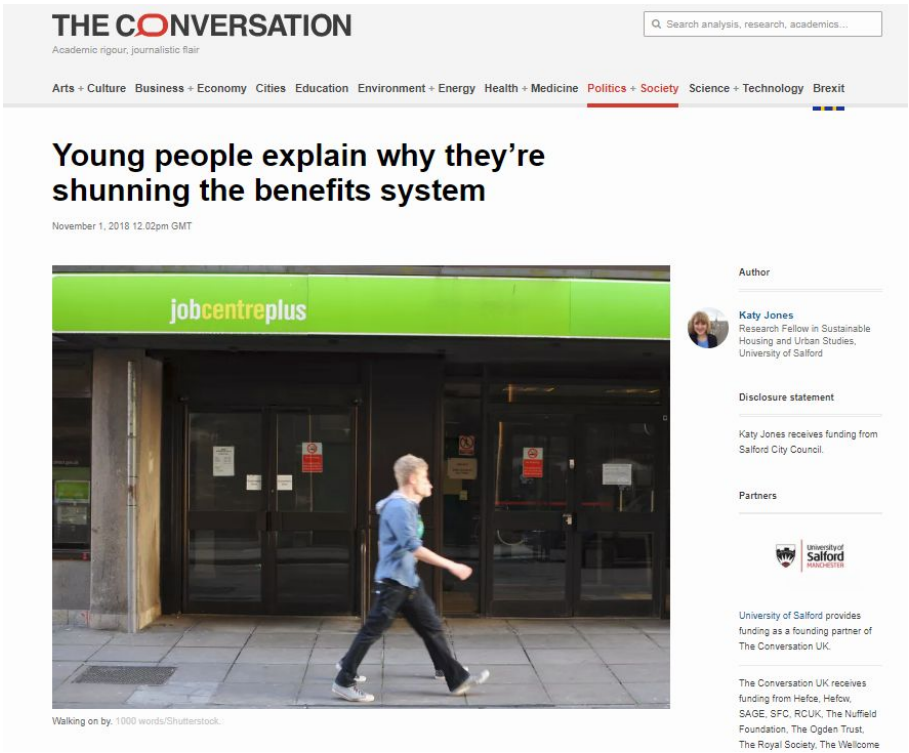
Examples: personal stories

Personal stories of your own, or from your work: Insights from your own life, or those from your research can be a way into a topic. (31,000 reads)

Voices drawn from your research: Drawing on people encountered in fieldwork offers other voices to the reader. (2,000 reads)



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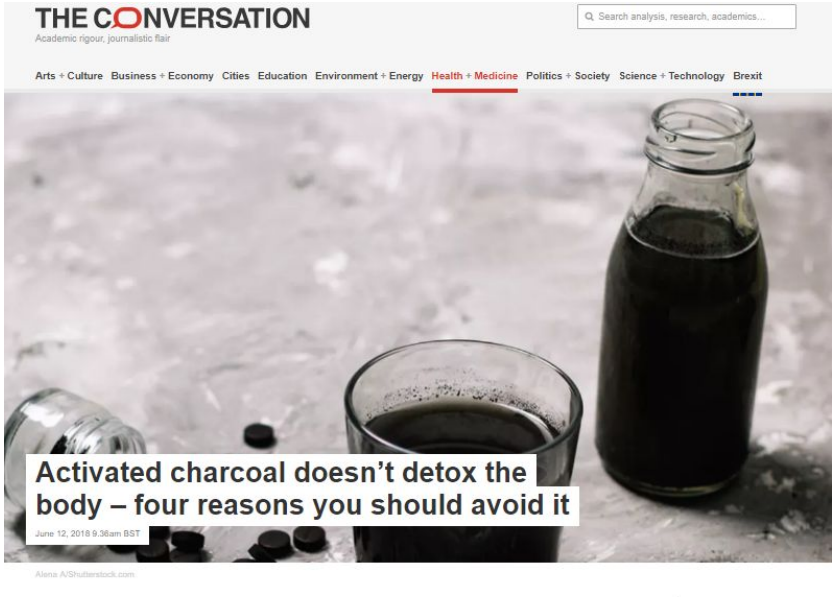
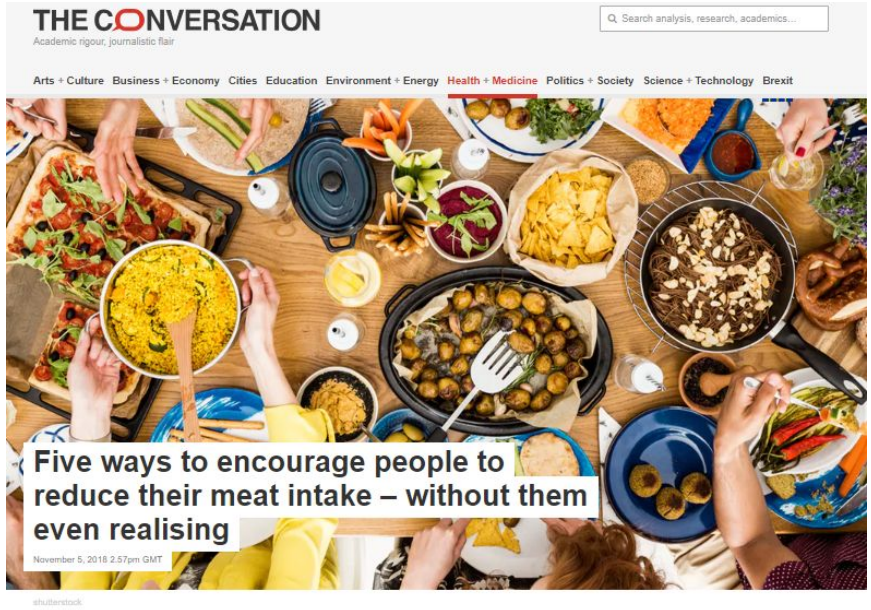
Examples: the list approach

Headlines that promise a handful of bite-sized pieces of information appeal to time-poor, attention deficit readers, but this doesn't alter the research rigour of the 800 words that follow. (415,000 reads)



The list approach also works well with articles that explain techniques or approaches, or offer advice and guidance. (12,000 reads)



Putting it all together

A journalistic approach

Think about your audience:

Intelligent, educated, curious

...but not interested in wading through dense, academic prose

It's not about 'dumbing down'

...but ideas need to be expressed clearly for non-specialist readers

What would *most interest the reader*?

It may or may not be what is most *academically* interesting.

The ‘top line’ test

- You know you've got a good story if you can summarise it in one sentence
- Work out what the right angle is by identifying the most important or interesting aspect *to your readers* and focusing on that
- Make a point or two - not all of them. Get used to leaving things out
- **Tell me something I don’t know...**
- **...and tell me why it matters**. Why should I care?

Now you try the ‘top line test’

“I have interviews from Paris, Berlin and Barcelona where I interviewed digital activists in the last six months.

“There is a quieter digital activism of building platforms for civic purposes and cultural citizenship. Tech/artists involved in projects for digital inclusion against surveillance etc, which does not involve cyberattacks a la anonymous or just using social media to mobilise protests but builds community and is for public use as digital commons.”

How a new wave of digital activists is changing society

“Doomsday scenarios surrounding a robot apocalypse abound in popular science fiction, from Battlestar Galactica to Terminator. But working with machine intelligence in the lab can uncover innovative designs that can help humanity and enable us to learn how our own intelligence came about.

“My recent work included designing a ‘mother’ robot that can manufacture its own ‘children’ without human intervention. In the process it uses principles from nature including natural selection to produce incrementally superior generations that improve in performance on a specific task.”

How we built a robot that can evolve - and why it won't take over the world

Over to you!

Style and tone

- **Get to the point!**
  Start at the end: the latest events, what we learned, implications or conclusions. Don't write chronologically

- **Battle for the reader's attention, from the opening sentence**
  Ensure important elements are included early on, and make every word count

- **Be clear, be concise**
  Use short, active sentences, not passive. **Cut words ruthlessly**

- **Polish your intro and payoff**
  Write and re-write your opening and final lines until they shine and speak directly to the subject in hand

- **Use plain English**
  Get a feel for the informal – how might you explain your topic to a non-specialist friend in the pub, or to a teenager?

- **Offer examples**
  Make the abstract concrete

- Make sure your piece answers more questions than it poses: **who**, **what**, **where**, **when**, **why**, and sometimes **how**

- **The reader does not know the subject like you do**
  Explain (or avoid) technical terms. Don't assume the reader's understanding.

Simplifying words

in the absence of =	without
has the ability to =	can
consequently/therefore/thus =	so
located in close proximity to =	near
however =	but
utilise =	use

Writing style - examples

Before:

“To understand the formation of rip currents one must consider the processes that occur as wave transformation occurs at the beach – the key requirement is that spatial gradients in wave breaking must occur parallel to the shoreline. The usual driver of these gradients are sandbars that have formed due to the deposition of sediment in the nearshore zone.”

After:

“For rip currents to form, there must be areas close to the beach where some waves break and other areas where they do not. Usually this is caused by sandbars on the seabed that form from the sediment deposited by waves and tides.”

Before:

“A formalised approach to integrating the outcome of prediction models with clearly defined management objectives may help to facilitate an objective discussion of control actions and the information needed to most effectively implement control amid significant logistical constraints.”

After:

“By comparing proposed interventions we can highlight which are expected to save the most lives.”

Writing style - examples

Before:

“The medical use of charged particles (CPs) such as protons differ from x-rays (which are also perhaps confusingly called photons). CPs deposit energy within peaks along their tracks with no dose beyond the peaks, whereas x-rays release energy more uniformly but inevitably deposit dose in a much wider area of the body when used to treat cancer. The energy density in the CP Bragg peaks exceeds that for x-rays and so greater biological effects occur.”

After:

“The recent case of Neon Roberts and the legal dispute over his treatment for a brain tumour threw the spotlight on the potential risks of using radiotherapy to treat complex cancers in children.

Radiotherapy is an effective way of targeting tumours but it can also affect the surrounding healthy tissues. Unpleasant side effects can include permanent damage to organs or the appearance of new cancers caused by the radiation. These are particularly difficult problems in growing children. Proton beam radiotherapy, which uses high energy charged particles (CPs) to target cancers more directly, can be less damaging than using X-rays but is hugely expensive.”

The pitch


NEWS
TEXT
DATA
MEDIA
ARTICLE
STORY
PRESS
MAGAZINE
WEBSITE
TALK
BREAKING
WORLD
INTERNET
BROADCAST
GOSSIP
SHARING
SOCIAL
VIRAL
ALERT
PRESS
GLOBAL
BUSINESS
MEDIA
EXTRA
HEAR
RADIO
COMMUNICATION
TV
MEDIA
RATE
LETTER
SHARE
MODERN
TECHNOLOGY
JOURNALISM
NEWSPAPER
WORD
INFORM
ARCHIVE
PRINT
FORUM
RUMOR

How to pitch to editors

Tell us, in 200 words or so:

- **What's the story?**
  In a nutshell, what are your conclusions or findings, or the takeaway for the reader? Be succinct, be clear, be bold

- **Why should the reader care?**
  Why is it interesting or significant to an audience that aren't specialists in the field?

- **Why now?**
  What is it relevant to – breaking news? A broad topic of current interest? A recently published paper? A future event you're pitching in advance of?

- **The key points** of your argument

- **Why are you the person to write this?**
  What expertise informs your view? What can you bring to the story that others can't?

Sell your story!

A good pitch is written like a good story
A strong headline that interests the reader, and opening paragraphs compelling them to read on

...and the same rules apply
Be clear, be succinct, no jargon, and don't assume the reader knows the topic

But here, your reader is the editor
Convince us why what you want to write is important and interesting

Try to convey in your pitch some of the enthusiasm you have for your work

If you can make us like the story, together we can produce a piece that readers will like too.

How to pitch to editors

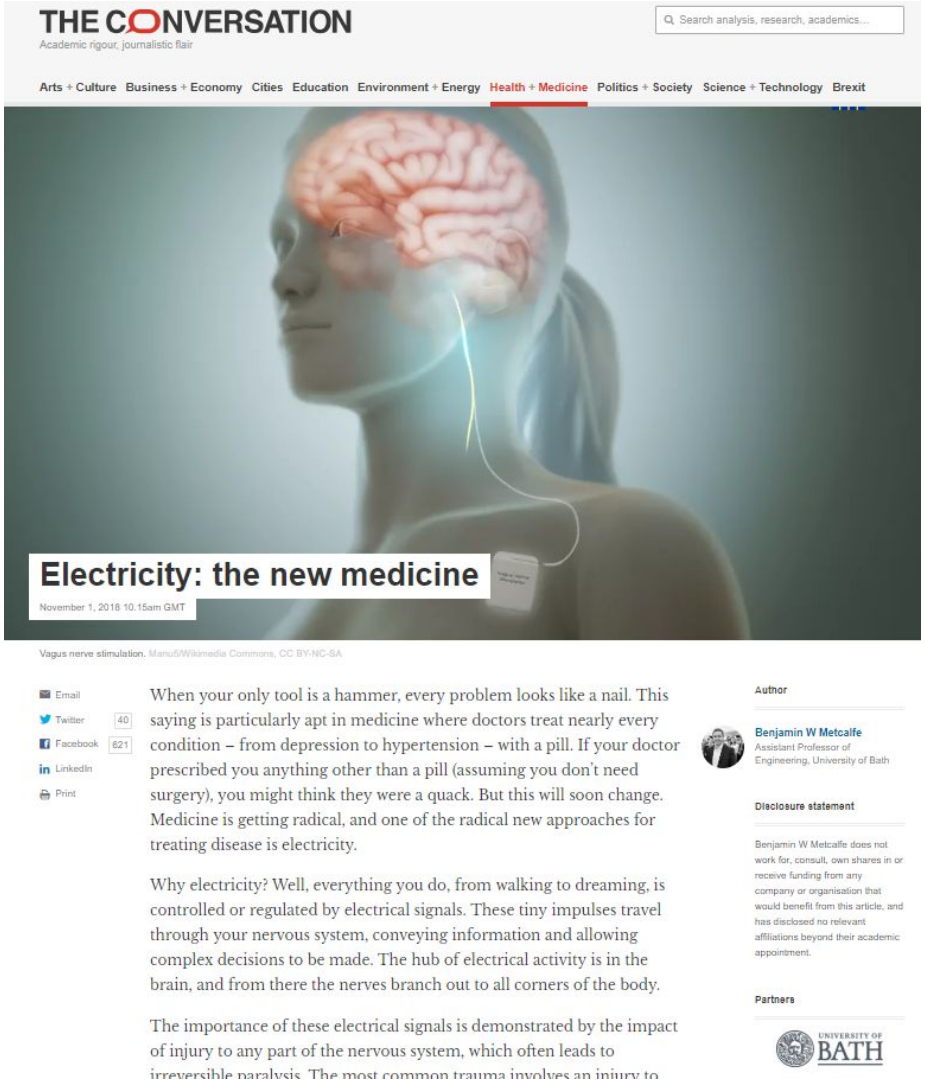
This pitch:

Story: Luigi Galvani first discovered that electricity was responsible for controlling muscles in 1791, founding the field of bioelectronic medicines which in turn led to the invention of devices such as the pacemaker. However, despite all potential, few other products have made it to market – why?

Key points: Broader applications include neuroprosthesis and brain-computer interfaces. The fundamental issues are technological, surgical, and regulatory (and the latter might be the biggest challenge).

Significance: Bioelectronics will transform conventional medicine, with significant potential to efficiently and accurately diagnose and treat diseases. Vagus nerve stimulation has a strong clinical relevance in treating diseases as varied as alcoholism, epilepsy, and sepsis. There is significant interest from companies such as GSK, Google and Tesla founder Elon Musk, but despite its potential there remain very few bioelectronic devices on the market today.

Became this story:
(31,000 reads)



How to pitch to editors

This pitch:

Story: The seven ages of exercise - how to optimise your health by knowing how much and what type of exercise to do through the lifespan.

Key points: More recently we see that exercise can be prescribed like a drug - but like a drug the 'prescription' varies over time and needs to be adapted to prevent or manage common diseases. This proposed article would offer an insight into the science of clinical exercise prescription to optimise physical and mental health through the lifespan.

Significance: How should exercise be modified to optimise health throughout our lives? For instance, weight-bearing exercise such as walking or running during the early years can build bone density which will only become meaningful in the fifth decade and beyond. 'Over-exercising' or 'over-training' in the second and third decades can lead to a cascade of fertility problems in females. So what is sweet spot of exercise at each decade to futureproof health, without causing damage and how should exercise be modified if common diseases are present?

Became this story:
(544,000 reads)

How to pitch to editors

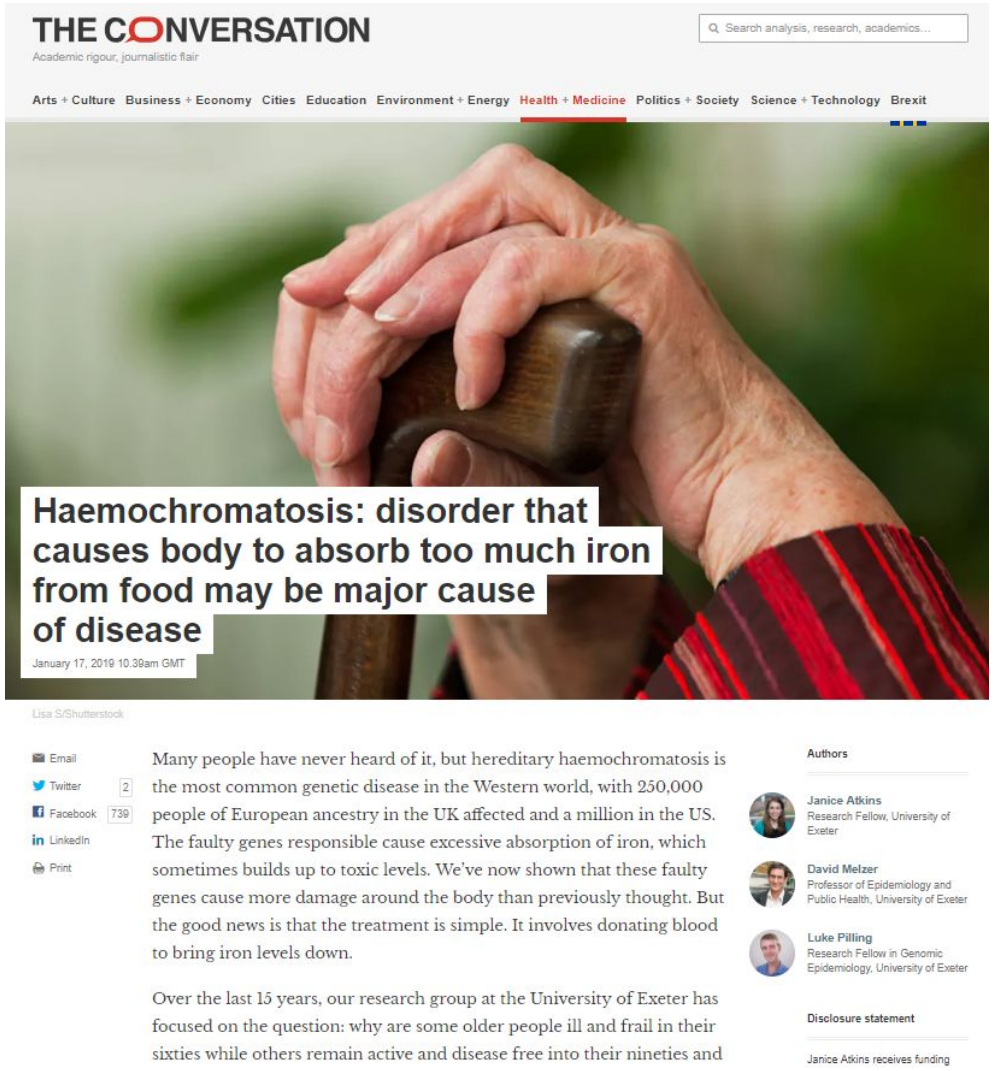
This pitch:

Story: Haemochromatosis, where people absorb too much iron from their diet, is the most common genetic disorder in Northern Europe and causes far higher levels of serious disease than previously thought

Key points: Accumulated iron damages organs and causes disease. It was thought that haemochromatosis mutations only sometimes caused disease, typically between ages 40 to 60. Analysing data from 2,890 people in UK Biobank with two copies of the genetic mutation (HFE C282Y) - nearly ten times more than in the largest previous study - we've shown that it is actually much more common, responsible for serious arthritis, diabetes, liver disease and frailty in old people.

Significance: Haemochromatosis, previously thought to be a lower-level risk to health, actually causes high levels of health problems. Blood tests for iron and genetic testing are simple and cost-effective. Treatment by giving blood is safe and effective if started early, therefore justifying re-examination of screening to identify at risk individuals.

Became this story:
(235,000 reads)



THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

Search analysis, research, academics...

Arts + Culture | Business + Economy | Cities | Education | Environment + Energy | Health + Medicine | Politics + Society | Science + Technology | Brexit

Haemochromatosis: disorder that causes body to absorb too much iron from food may be major cause of disease

January 17, 2019 10.39am GMT

Lisa S/Shutterstock

Email | Twitter 2 | Facebook 739 | LinkedIn | Print

Many people have never heard of it, but hereditary haemochromatosis is the most common genetic disease in the Western world, with 250,000 people of European ancestry in the UK affected and a million in the US. The faulty genes responsible cause excessive absorption of iron, which sometimes builds up to toxic levels. We've now shown that these faulty genes cause more damage around the body than previously thought. But the good news is that the treatment is simple. It involves donating blood to bring iron levels down.

Over the last 15 years, our research group at the University of Exeter has focused on the question: why are some older people ill and frail in their sixties while others remain active and disease free into their nineties and

Authors

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Research Fellow in Genomic Epidemiology, University of Exeter

Disclosure statement

Janice Atkins receives funding

How not to pitch to editors

This pitch:

"Drawing on research work on peri urban areas we highlight the problem of disintegrated development. We then use the lessons learnt from our interdisciplinary research projects to provide an improved action plan to address this problem. In so doing we address the current impasse and stagnation in many of our town vs countryside debates."

… was not commissioned.

Why?

This pitch:

“This article will focus on the adoption of experimental methods in the Humanities. Specifically, it will address the fact that humanists are talking about ‘data’ and scientists are talking about ‘narrative’. What led to this seeming negative cross-correlation of materials and methods and what possibilities does it offer? In considering these questions this article will deal with confirmation bias that plagues the sciences and poststructuralism that has similarly plagued the humanities. Ultimately it will outline the positive aspects of that experimental behaviourism may provide.”

… was not commissioned.

Why?

Responding to comments

We moderate comments as per our community standards: https://theconversation.com/uk/community-standards

- **Get in early**. Help set a constructive tone. Pose questions.
- **Deploy your knowledge** with brief answers to reader questions or links to research
- **Assume good faith** but don't tolerate abuse. **Humour can puncture aggression** (or what appears to be aggression).
- **Individual troublemakers: report and ignore**. "Don't feed the trolls".
- **Report off-topic posts** if you feel they are aimed at derailing discussion
- **Make a call** as to when it's no longer worthwhile trying to engage
- In all cases, **report abusive comments so we can delete them** and ban those responsible if necessary.

Use the Report button found on each comment to alert the moderator

The quality of comments **improves when the author participates**

Ways to get involved

Direct commission

We will contact you for your expertise

Pitch your ideas

Tell us about your new research,
comment or explain something in the news

Respond to the expert request

Let your press team know you're keen

Use your press office

They can help you sharpen your ideas
or pitch on your behalf

Thank you!

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Pitch us an idea
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Our health editor:
clint.witchalls@theconversation.com

Any questions?