

How to communicate research for policy influence

Toolkit N°3

Engage with media

This toolkit is part of a series addressing different aspects and tools on research communication for policy influence.

The importance of 'being' at the media

Usually, when researchers and practitioners think about communication, what first comes to our mind is the media (in its various types: print press, television, radio and online). Even though a communication strategy encompasses much more than developing a fluid relationship with the press, it is undeniable the **critical role mass media (known as “the fourth power”) have in shaping public opinion and raising awareness** on previously ignored public policy issues.

Moreover, media is a key channel to feeding policy debate with research. Analysis, relevant research and policy recommendations are only effective if they can influence decision makers. In this context, **journalism can become an ally of think tanks when it allows making research visible to a massive audience** –including public officers– and reflecting upon the consequences of adopting a particular policy path to address a public problem or generating awareness of an emerging problem that requires policy attention.

However, **the media are not disinterested players**. Media are, above all, political actors, with their own interests and needs. Moreover, as companies, the media also follow market logic. Therefore, it is necessary to better understand the way media operate and the

challenges they set as socializers of research. Notwithstanding, it is also important to acknowledge that **the media provide a unique platform for reaching citizens and decision makers with research findings**, as they are a very powerful, quick and an effective channel to disseminate messages to millions of people worldwide. Thus, **having media skills is increasingly useful in the academic and public policy world**.

Reasons for engaging with media include:

- **Raise awareness.** Media allow to communicate your research findings to a massive audience, thus gaining visibility of your work and/or organisation and the possibility to raise awareness on the issue that you have analysed in depth.
- **Address decision makers indirectly.** Politicians and public officers often pay attention to research once it has been broadcasted by the media. If your research affects them, they may be asked about it or have it quoted against them. Furthermore, media may be the most visible (though not always the better: see the challenges that entail working with media in the table below) route to reach other stakeholders: private sector, non-profits and the general audience.
- **Make your research intelligible to others.** The media are “translators”.

Among other functions, journalists inform a mass audience on complex facts, and, at the same time, they may help build an explanation for the causes and consequences of the events they report on. On many occasions journalists can help researchers explain their findings to a lay audience. In short, media and think tanks

can provide information and evidence that help people make better decisions.

- **Position your institution.** Media coverage can also help promote the name of your institution, and raise its reputation. Moreover, media coverage is often used by donors as an indicator to partially measure the impact of research.

Challenges and opportunities in communicating research through media

Challenges	Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possible misrepresentation of research by journalists • Journalist may lack skills to interpret and correctly explain research • Editors may not be interested in publishing research • Citizenship may not be interested in research • Risk of being used as a source in an article that you know will be critical of a government or public official (very common in polarized contexts) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researchers can link their findings to current affairs– i.e. MDGs • Journalists can produce well-informed quality journalism serving public interest • Editors can support journalistic specialization, build capacity of their staff and credibility of their product • Citizens can get involved by commenting upon findings and recommendations, sharing them and building new content to feed public debate • Research can gain transparency and legitimacy by being scrutinised in the public domain

Source: CIPPEC based on Panos Southern Africa RELAY.

The challenge of polarized contexts

Researchers working in countries with highly polarised political contexts face an extra challenge when working with media. In such contexts, media are usually polarised and journalistic production dealing with political issues may be biased. In these contexts, silence is often seen as the best way to avoid being distorted by one side or another. However, with caution, it is possible to design an intervention strategy to sort out obstacles.

When this happens, it is important to reflect on different issues, which involves thinking on the actors included or excluded in polarized communication contexts:

- ✓ What is the editorial line of the chosen media to communicate research?
- ✓ What are the media's target audiences?
- ✓ To what extent will the chosen media reach the think tank's target audience?

- ✓ What are the risks of communicating research in media that are critical of the government?
- ✓ What are the risks of communicating research in media that are favorable to the government?
- ✓ Who is the reporter you will be interacting with? How long has he/she been reporting on the think tank's findings? Is he/she a specialist in your research field? Does he/she have a good reputation amongst other journalists?
- ✓ Are there any alternatives, such as a young and emerging media you should start relating to?

Polarized contexts often stimulate the creation of independent new media that, though smaller, capture an audience interested in having a different approach than the one prevailing in mainstream media. This is a good opportunity for a researcher to become an ongoing source of valuable and unbiased information.

Invest time on journalists

For young organizations that want to make their work visible, **it is important to invest some time in becoming a regular source for journalists.** In this stage of your organization, it will be very helpful to **answer all of their doubts, provide them with data, search and produce information related to public events** they are reporting on and that might be related to ongoing research in your organization. In other words, at the beginning you'll need to respond to journalists' demands and you may have less control over what is published: **overtime, you'll probably become a reliable source and a legitimized voice** on some issues. So this initial investment may be the first step to building a media partnership that in the future will allow you to publish regularly op-ed and other articles focusing on your research findings.

Media or policy makers?

When asked about the most adequate strategy to influence decision makers, Laura Zommer, journalist and CIPPEC's former communications director, said: **"Tell me in what phase your institution is and I'll tell you which audience you should focus on"**. At an early stage, a think tank will probably be unknown to policy makers. Therefore, attracting their attention will be difficult and you'll need to communicate with them via the media, as an endorser of what you have to convey. As political actors begin to notice your institution and your research, you may start addressing them directly. If you're not a known brand, you'll probably need to aim at the press first. **Once the think tank is considered relevant in the public arena, you will be able to target more effectively relevant political actors directly.**

Become a reliable source for journalists

In order to better engage with journalists, your organisation needs to build its own contact database with key media players. Journalists hunt and gather news. Reporters and editors are the decision makers when it comes to picking stories to cover. All of them need fast and accurate information from reliable sources. Hence, it is important to get to know and develop a relationship with the people that cover your research area in order to contribute with background information, keep them updated on new research findings and act as a reliable source that can check official information.

To keep a fluent but orderly relationship with journalists, it is essential to create and constantly update a journalists' database. You could start by reading newspapers, blogs and social networks to keep track of who is writing about what. Compile a list of journalists that may be interested in your research, and gather as much information as you can about them (email, mobile phone, social networks accounts) because you might later need to deliver information as quickly as possible. You can also make regular calls to the media to keep your contacts updated. Include in the database a field to track your different interactions with each journalist and keep a record on the information they requested. This will help you raise your profile and anticipate journalists' information needs.

To become a reliable source for the media, it is also important for researchers to be aware of recent articles published by reporters they seek to work with. To do so, a good idea is to follow journalists on their social networks, to receive updates of their work and know their comments on current affairs. Besides knowing what information they need, the activity of journalists in social networks

often provides much more information about them than their articles do. In many cases, it is possible to know what their interests are, the opinions they have on other issues and public figures, their ideology, and their interaction with other journalists. All this information will provide researchers with important feedback on who the journalist is and what information is valuable to him.

Tips for becoming a reliable source for journalists

- Be available. Give reporters, especially to those who work odd hours, both your home and mobile number and tell them it's OK to call at any time.
- Seek journalists at meetings, events, etc. and give them your business card.
- Be ready to be quoted. Having to be called back once the quote has been cleared will reduce the chance of the quote being used.
- Know the issues. Read and comment intelligently on developments relating to your cause.
- Don't always assume journalists have received the information you have about topical events or relevant news releases.
- Avoid rhetoric and ideological arguments; most journalists have already heard this before.
- Know your facts; never pass on information unless you know it's true.
- Know where to find information or contacts fast and therefore gain a reputation as a good source.

Source: Salzmann.

Remember **you don't have to know everything to be a source of information. But don't speak beyond your expertise** (Whitford). Moreover, today a person might not be a specialist on an issue, but he/her can give a lot of visibility to that issue by sharing ideas or information through his/her networks.

On and off the record

The relationship between journalists and their sources follow a basic contract that designates sources speaking *on and off the record*. When a source speaks **on the record**, it allows the journalist to publish the information it provided, and to quote both its words and its identity. On the other hand, when speaking **off the record**, sources provide information that journalists cannot publish nor attribute to them in the media. In many cases, off the records allow journalists to access other sources and new information.

Therefore, when interacting with a journalist it is essential for the source to clearly indicate whether it is speaking on or off the record. When speaking off the record, it is vital to identify when the off the record statement starts and when it ends. Moreover, to speak off the record with a reporter sources need to ensure they have built a long and solid link with them that guarantees the journalist will not break the covenant of confidentiality. Beyond that, it is best to always speak on the record with reporters: journalists and their audience (as well as think tank's audiences) appreciate the value of the information and the analysis experts do.

Make your research newsworthy!

As Hovland (2005) says, researchers cannot wait and hope friendly journalists find their issues newsworthy. Quite surely, they will have to adapt their findings to make them newsworthy. The **key is timing**, so it is important to connect efficiently your findings and key messages to breaking news. When research adds evidence to breaking news events, journalists will be avid to talk to you. This is easier than convincing them to publish information that is not linked with

the current public agenda. One way of taking advantage of current news, is to offer them a story, data or information that illustrates a new or local perspective, dramatizes a point of view or advances the debate somehow.

But news is not an exact science. A news-worthy story that fills the papers today, may not have got any mentions had it appeared previously. It all depends on how national and international events develop. To capture an audience, media often need to create entertainment. Scandal and controversy are virtually guaranteed column inches. Therefore, when presenting a story to the media, remember that **the larger the human interest angle, the larger the news is likely to be.** We are fascinated by things that may impact us, whether it is now, in the future or in the past. By giving practical examples and applying your research to ‘everyday life’, you can give life into a story that may otherwise be a bit dry (ESRC).

Seven pillars are used by journalists to assess newsworthiness:

1. Timeliness
2. Proximity
3. Rarity
4. Prominence
5. Impact
6. Novelty/Newness
7. Human interest

Source: GDNNet-AERC, 2012.

In order to make your research newsworthy, you may want to consider the following advices:

✓ **Act fast.** News hooks may include: a public hearing, court decision, passage of a bill, a natural disaster, a major speech, a nomination, a national holiday, a crime, an anniversary, a human catastrophe.

✓ **Link messages with breaking news.** Take advantage of opportunities where you can disseminate your message by linking research findings to a recent event (eg. You give journalists statistics and policy recommendations on public transportation when a train accident has taken place). All you have to do is offer a story that adds to what has already been published: make them feel your contribution will feed the debate with quality information.

✓ **Identify something unusual of human interest.** For example, regular reporting about a critical issue such as HIV/AIDS in Africa has created a general fatigue. This is where you can step in and help the media by highlighting previously ignored angles.

✓ **Use pegs to highlight and plug your work.** Keep a diary of important dates and international days that relate to your research; this will help when making a plan to raise awareness about an issue. For instance, CIPPEC has recently launched an initiative called “CIPPEC Data” (a tool for viewing, analyzing and understanding statistical information on public policy) that was released on the “Journalist Day” in Argentina. Another way of doing this is sharing evidence-based policy recommendations or proposals during electoral campaigns.

✓ **Provide as much background information as possible.** Remember that journalists are not as knowledgeable about your field as you do. Background information will provide a context for your story, which ensures a better coverage.

✓ **Package information in a way that makes it easy to be used by media.** Use titles and subtitles, graphs, diagrams, storylines, charts and tables. It is very important to rewrite your research findings

as a piece of news, because journalists are then enabled to read it in the format that they are used to.

- **Show willingness to help** journalists to find the information they are looking for, even if you don't have it: you can recommend other researchers, share the contact of another journalist or indicate web sites to get data.

How and when research makes news

- Breakthroughs
- Award winning research
- Research of human interest – the one that links to people's daily lives
- Research that produces negative results
- Counterintuitive findings
- Polls
- New research
- Alternative voices
- Research conducted by or focusing on minority groups
- White papers, audits, commissions
- Government funded to feed into policy

Source: CIPPEC based on GNet-AERC (2012).

Means to communicate with the media

- Press releases
- Interviews
- Studio discussions
- News conference
- Features
- Packages
- Special occasions – visits, trips, promotion
- Events
- Online tools and communities

Source: CIPPEC based on Danov.

Keep track of your contributions!

Last but not least, **it is important to monitor your appearances in media**. By doing media monitoring, you will have more information on: quantitative and qualitative impact of the organization, the impact of your work on policy issues in the public and media agenda, the plurality of media in which the organization is mentioned, the perception of the reputation of the organization and its political position.

Once you have all of this information (you may keep a daily track or establish a more convenient frequency), you can **elaborate a media report** with information on quantity and quality analytics: issues receiving more mentions, most quoted staff members, most receptive media source. This report will allow you to **track and compare the evolution of the relationship between the organization and the media**¹.

¹ For further information on M&E, see Learners, practitioners and teachers. Handbook on monitoring, evaluating and managing knowledge for policy influence (CIPPEC, 2010).

To continue exploring!

Recommendations from CIPPEC

- *Communicating research through the media*, Panos Southern Africa RELAY.
Available at: www.researchintouse.com
- *What is the media and how does it work, Writing a Press Release and How to prepare an Op-Ed*, GDNNet Research Communications: Mombasa Media Workshop, Mombasa, 2010.
Available at www.gdnet.org
- *Get media savvy, understanding the press*, Farai Samhungu, GDNNet-TrustAfrica Policy Workshop, Uganda, 2011.
Available at www.gdnet.org
- *Targeting tools: Media engagement*”, ODI
Available at: www.odi.org.uk
- *Researchers making news*, Farai Samhungu, GDNNet-AERC Policy Brief Training Workshop, Nairobi, 2012.
- *Successful Communication: a toolkit for researchers and civil society organisations*”, Ingie Hovland, ODI, 2005.
Available at: www.odi.org.uk
- *Working with media, a best practice guide*, ESCR.
Available at: www.esrc.ac.uk

Next Toolkit:
Online tools

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