Surviving and thriving in the ‘knowledge pond’

Workshop on ‘Improving the Impact of Development Research through better Research Communication and Uptake’

29 November 2010

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Outline

- Historical perspective
- The view from the supply side
- The role of intermediaries
- A few words on the demand side
- Conclusions
For a long time, nobody seemed too concerned about it ....

With honourable exceptions:

Communication was at best an afterthought

And at worst a distraction from the ‘real work’ of doing research
First steps (circa 1994)

- Breaking through the jargon barrier
- More active ‘push’ from the supply side
- Starting to think about research audiences
- Progress – but still essentially a linear model
Nowadays ...

- Research communication is ‘on the map’
- A whole array of new communication channels: websites, email lists, blogs, podcasts, RSS feeds, YouTube, open access journals ....
- A lot of innovation and creativity
- More sophisticated communication thinking – the old linear model is dead (nearly)
- A much more crowded marketplace
- Research much more global and ‘networked’
Recognition that development research is of limited value if it stays on the shelves

Funders under pressure to demonstrate poverty impact of research

A quest for more ‘evidence based’ policy & practice

More competition among research players

The internet
Barriers

The barriers are still there

- Skills gaps
- Resourcing
- Incentives and trust
Skills gaps

I’m a researcher, not a journalist
Three types of researchers

- Sceptics and hermits: 10%
- Natural communicators: 10%
- Willing converts: 80%

Advice: work with the enthusiasts. For others, training helps, but it makes sense to bring in specialist communicators.
Good communication work requires proper resourcing (10-30+% of project budgets)

Needs to be planned from the outset - it’s no good leaving communication to the end of the project

Communication capacity takes time to build up – networks, skills, mailing lists, reputation ....
For most researchers, peer reviewed academic publications are still the gold standard.

What value is placed on communication and policy engagement work when it comes to career progression?

Researchers tend to be suspicious of journalists and communicators – the fear of ‘dumbing down’

A proactive funder can help to change the incentive system – so have a crucial role.
Success factors

- Leadership from senior management
- A supportive and insistent funder
- A strategic approach
- An injection of communication skills
- Putting value on communication roles
- A partnership approach
- Persistence
Intermediaries – a new set of players

- Journalists and librarians have long played this role
- Now a new generation has sprung up – many taking advantage of the internet
- A range or approaches and niches
- Complement the work of research institutes
- Form part of a richer knowledge ecosystem
Life in the knowledge pond

My new pond after one month
Life in the knowledge pond

After one year: a much richer ecosystem
Some examples of intermediaries

NB: Work in progress. More to add
The special role of ‘intermediaries’

- Specialist skills and capacities
- Breadth of coverage – range and diversity
- Trusted brand
- Editorial independence
- Continuity
- Critical mass
Success factors for intermediaries

- Establishing a niche and ‘brand’
- Close attention to user needs and preferences
- Being innovative, but not technology driven
- Cooperating not competing
- Learning from others and not reinventing the wheel (see www.knowledgebrokersforum.org)
- Sustainable funding beyond the start-up phase
Understanding the demand side

- It’s a muddy pond
- Research is not the only missing ingredient in better policy making
- There are many reasons why research may be dismissed, ignored, or misunderstood
- Researchers and communicators need to ‘get their feet wet’ if they are to understand these realities, and learn how to be most effective
This new focus on research communications is long overdue.

It’s complex, and is opening up a whole range of new challenges.

Strong support from research funders is the key driver.

Taken seriously it’s going to transform the way research is communicated ….. and the impact it can have.
Challenges for this workshop

- What is needed for a healthy ‘knowledge pond’, and what can we do to bring it about?
- Given these complexities, how do we demonstrate the impact of any of this?
- We’ve got the message on the importance of research communication – how do we get researchers, research directors, and donors on board?

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