

Getting Serious about Research Communication

Surviving and thriving in the 'knowledge pond'

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

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Outline

- Historical perspective
- The view from the supply side
- The role of intermediaries
- A few word on the demand side
- Conclusions

Who cares about research communication?

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’

What's changed?

- 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

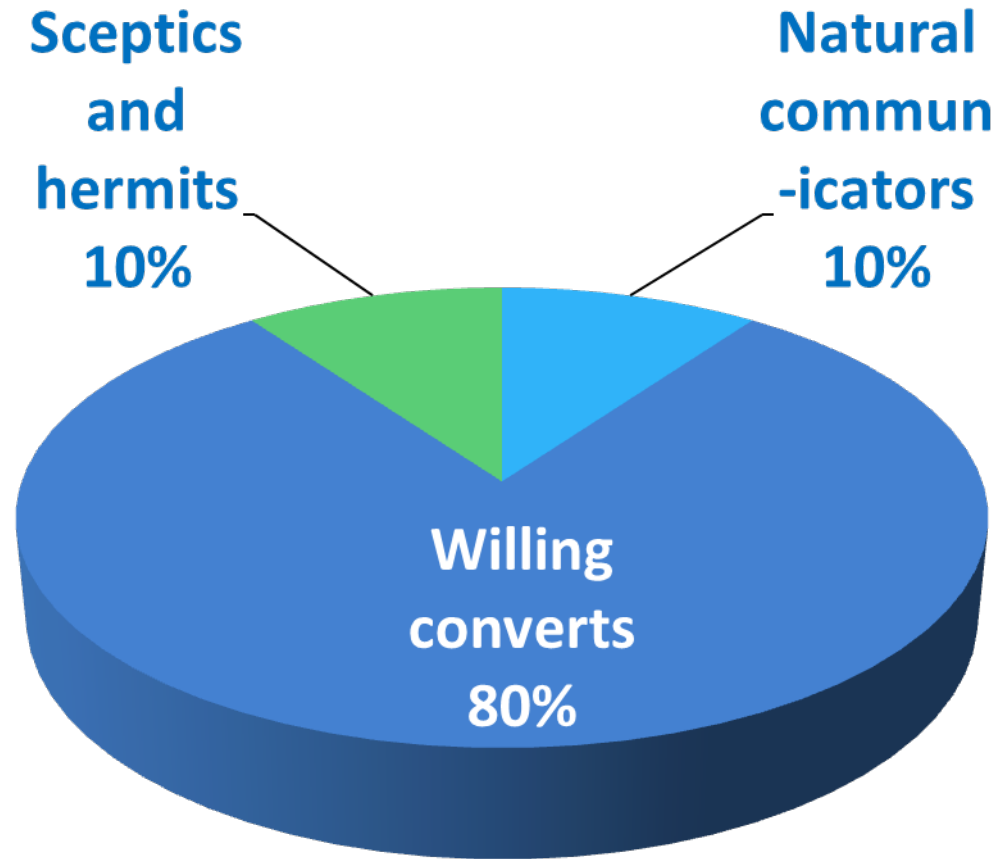
The barriers are still there

- Skills gaps
- Resourcing
- Incentives and trust

Skills gaps



Three types of researchers



Advice: work with the enthusiasts. For others, training helps, but it makes sense to bring in specialist communicators

Resourcing

- 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

Incentives and trust

- 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 libararians 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

Conclusions

- 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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