



Getting into the Kitchen

Media strategies for research

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Cover image:
Newsreader on a TV station in Somaliland.
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Introduction



Local television crew in Comoros
interviewing a street child
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In the words of a South African researcher, the media can help research become linked to policy processes by “getting you into the kitchen, being part of the soup-making”.¹ This paper explores the roles the media play and looks at the linkages between policy, research and media. It considers some of the dilemmas faced, and the options and approaches available when a research programme, institute or researcher is constructing a media strategy. It lays out some of the main steps in developing a strategy. This paper is complemented by *Working with the Media: A guide for researchers*, which includes practical guidance and tips for engagement with the media.

In this paper the term ‘policy’ includes policy formulation, implementation and evaluation and is not restricted to that of government but includes international organisations, bilateral agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the private sector and others. The media is taken to include community, local, national and international forms of radio, print, television and online services.

¹ Interview with Andries de Toit, Director, University of Western Cape Programme for Land and Agrarian Studies, December 2004

Linking research, policy and publics

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Villagers listening to the radio in Zimbabwe

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Roles the media can play

The media play a range of roles relevant to linking research and policy processes:

- **Informing:** the media is a means to inform the general public or specific audiences that research is underway, or to disseminate research findings or messages.
- **Strengthening links:** by informing audiences of research, media engagement can help build links and alliances with groups interested in similar subjects.
- **Promoting and enabling dialogue:** the media provide fora where research can be shared and debated – e.g. through radio phone-ins, TV discussions, investigative journalism, newspaper articles and internet sites.
- **Shaping debate:** the media can focus on particular aspects of an issue and thereby shape the parameters of debate.
- **Building accountability:** the media can serve as a vehicle to share research findings, conclusions and recommendations with those who participated in or who supported the research. Media coverage of research findings and recommendations can give civil society organisations an opportunity to hold policy-makers to account.
- **Marketing:** it is essential for research institutes and researchers themselves to have a respected, credible presence in order to influence policy. Media coverage can reinforce or help establish this credibility.

Influencing policy

A consensus is emerging that the process of influencing policy is non-linear, often opportunistic and reliant on anecdotal evidence. Research is only one of many competing sources of information and policy change is often incremental and unpredictable. Nevertheless, Garret and Islam² argue that research information can provide an understanding and interpretation of data and the situation – a function they term ‘enlightenment’ – that is critical to policy decisions.

Current literature emphasises the importance of the political context on policy processes, including the level of democracy, governance, media freedom and academic freedom. The extent to which research can play a role in policy will be influenced by: the demand for research-based evidence; how policy-makers think; the policy implementation process; and how policy is translated into practice.³

2

Garret, J. L. and Islam, Y., 1998, *Policy Research and the Policy Process: Do the Twain Ever Meet?*, Gatekeeper Series 74, London: International Institute for Environment and Development

3

Overseas Development Institute, 2003, *The Rapid Framework*, available at www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/Lessons/Tools/RAPID_Framework

The media environment

2



News stand in Patan,
Kathmandu Valley, Nepal
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Opportunities in a changing media environment

Liberalisation and commercialisation of the media over the last 15 years have led to a more crowded, dynamic and democratic media landscape in many countries. The first challenge to media engagement is to understand the different types of media, their audiences, the type of content they produce and the opportunities offered by each.

Different media have different strengths and weaknesses. In many countries radio has the greatest access, reaching remote areas and overcoming issues of literacy. It also provides opportunities for two-way interaction through talkshows and phone-ins. TV, particularly in Asia, addresses social issues via news, documentary, soap opera and other forms. Satellite TV links communities across national boundaries. Print provides opportunities for in-depth reporting as well as headline news.

However, commercialisation has led to a focus on entertainment content, as media companies compete for advertising revenue and audiences. There is a risk that space for public interest content and for the concerns of the poor, in particular, may be shrinking in many countries. The focus on wealthier, urban audiences may mean the information gap between rich and poor, urban and rural is widening. In addition, most media outlets that are not owned by multinational media corporations are poorly resourced, often relying on northern news and content providers, such as the BBC, Reuters or CNN, and with limited capacity to engage with national and local issues.

Nevertheless, the 'media revolution' offers many opportunities. There are many new media outlets; they have greater freedom than previously; and many of them have a sense of responsibility towards the public interest. For example, a Panos evaluation found that print and radio media in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asian countries have a huge appetite for research-based stories and content, particularly where a local issue is put into a global context or vice versa.⁴ The challenge for researchers is to make their material accessible and media-friendly.

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Panos, 2005, Evaluation
of RELAY project 2004–5,
London (unpublished)

Does media coverage influence policy?

It is difficult to attribute specific policy decisions to media coverage – or to any other influencing activity. The time lapse between communicating research findings (including media coverage) and policy change varies hugely. In some cases an instant government response is provoked. In other cases debate and media coverage contribute to the general evolution of a policy discourse. For example, in Uganda, future policy-makers first heard about HIV/AIDS on the radio while fighting the civil war. Soon after they came to power, attention was turned to HIV/AIDS. The exposure of politicians to the subject undoubtedly played a role in this.⁵

Media coverage often influences public action and policy change by linking research, journalistic findings and campaigning organisations. For example, in India, Panos-supported investigative journalism on sterilisation camps in Uttar Pradesh led the National Human Rights Commission to issue warning notices to the state government; in Bihar, media coverage of the situation of wives of migrant workers stimulated local NGOs to address the women's needs and campaign for improved services.

The roles the media can play in communicating research also depend on a number of country-specific factors. These include the freedom of the media, media interest in and knowledge of a subject area, relevance of the subject to the public arena, the level of 'acceptability' or resistance to research findings, and the level of civil society engagement in policy processes.

Relationships between research and the media

In Panos interviews⁶, academic researchers highlighted worries that the media would present their subjects in an overly simplistic manner, and did not see the media as a means to disseminate their work. At the same time, journalists had not considered academic research as a source of materials for their stories, viewing academics as inaccessible, sometimes partial towards a government view and costly to access.

However, the development of constructive relationships can be encouraged. In Zambia, a Panos seminar on the World Trade Organization that brought together journalists, academics, NGOs and government stimulated one newspaper to set up a regular column on trade issues and the Ministry of Trade to begin issuing press briefings on its activities. Furthermore, Panos interviews showed that there is a strong basis for relationships between researchers and journalists based on their mutual recognition of a common interest in informing their publics about important issues.

There are a number of key findings from evaluations carried out by Panos. First, to gain media coverage of a subject, topicality and relevance are vital. For example, editors in Ghana, Ethiopia, India and Zambia noted that the fact that a subject was research-based was not really a factor in considering whether to publish a story.

⁵ Court, J, 2004, *Bridging Research and Policy on HIV/AIDS in Developing Countries – draft report*, London: Overseas Development Institute

⁶ Panos held workshops for journalists and academic researchers in 2002–03 in Southern Africa (South Africa and Zambia), Eastern Africa (Kenya) and South Asia (Nepal) and in 2004 in Sri Lanka

Second, journalists often do not know *how* to link to research. A common theme in Panos workshops was that journalists felt they were not 'qualified' to use or interpret research. Journalists in Sri Lanka commented that there is not a strong culture of research; similar concerns were raised by journalists in Uganda. Ethiopian and Eritrean journalists said that freelance journalists could not afford to purchase research papers and many did not have reliable internet access.

Finally, there is the issue of editorial control. The media do not want to simply carry a research message; they are more interested in generating debate around it. A Panos evaluation found that 47 per cent of the editors questioned prefer to cover research as part of a topical feature in which the researcher is one voice among many. The least popular format (5 per cent) was a 500-word summary describing the research and summarising the findings in a popular style. Media feedback has also stressed the need for research to look to the future and to be 'solution-oriented'.

An important message for researchers is the need to build relations with the media. Panos workshops⁷ attended by media and research communities recommended establishing formal and informal relationships between journalists and researchers.



DJ at a local radio station in Guinea Bissau presenting a programme about HIV and AIDS
GIACOMO PIROZZI | PANOS PICTURES

Risks and issues in media engagement

There are a number of risks and choices to be made when developing a media engagement strategy.

- **Political sensitivities:** where research may be highly sensitive (e.g. critical of government policy), some argue that one-to-one engagement with policy-makers is more effective than high-profile media coverage, which could be counter-productive.
- **Reinforce prejudices:** media coverage may reinforce prejudices, including those that research may be aiming to change.
- **Unwanted policy responses:** media coverage can stimulate unwanted responses, e.g. a knee-jerk reaction from policy-makers.
- **Negative image:** researchers can become known as 'bringers of doom', highlighting problems without proposing solutions.
- **Building unrealistic expectations:** if researchers develop simple messages and suggest solutions, it may appear that complex issues can be easily addressed.
- **Ethics:** the media is most interested in personal, individual stories and views that may have been given in confidence during research. However, it can also be argued that there is an ethical pressure to share research findings, leading to questions around who has the right to share or withhold research findings with various publics.
- **Capacity:** researchers may not have been trained to liaise with the media, and may not want to get involved in this area of work. In addition, successful engagement can increase workloads. If resources allow, it is possible to recruit expert capacity and additional dedicated staff. However, the media wants to engage with the researchers themselves so there is a limit to the activities that can be taken on by specialist staff.

There are no set safeguards for these risks. However, by building up relationships of trust with journalists and providing materials in an accessible manner, it is possible to increase media understanding of research issues and thereby minimise the risks. A strategy process can provide an opportunity to work through some of the dilemmas and options (see the following section).

Building a media strategy

Any media strategy should be part of a broader communication strategy that has clear policy objectives grounded in an understanding of the policy-making process. The five key steps in developing a media strategy are outlined below. Practical tips for media engagement are set out in the accompanying guide, *Working with the Media: A guide for researchers*.

Step 1 – Analyse the policy-making, research and media environments

Consider the policy-making, research and media environments at country and, if appropriate, international levels with reference to the factors outlined in the table below. The analysis of these environments can be carried out either in a rapid, participatory way through workshops or in more depth by commissioning studies.

Key factors in environment		
<p>Policy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Level of transparency ■ Responsiveness to media ■ Level of civil society activity ■ Priority issues in public domain ■ Relevant policies ■ Power of relevant departments and individuals ■ Key stakeholders in related policies (e.g. potential partners, allies and groups) ■ Relationship of national to international policy arena ■ Forthcoming opportunities and events (e.g. elections, policy meetings, Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper review) 	<p>Research</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ External interest in research subject (i.e. public and policy-makers) ■ Extent to which research leads to policy recommendations ■ Felt need for research in policy circles ■ Academic freedom ■ Resources available for communication strategy ■ Ability to present clearly to the media ■ Desire for alliances, link to networks, broad platform ■ Incentives for communication 	<p>Media</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Knowledge of research subject matter ■ Capacity to cover – money, time, people ■ Interest in subject ■ Agenda/aim and fit with research subject ■ Which media reach policy-makers ■ Which media reach the public and specialist audiences ■ Level of debate and dialogue within it ■ Key contacts, both actual and potential ■ Roles of radio, TV, print, online in-country reach, audience, etc.

Step 2 – Develop your communication aims

Key questions are:

- a Does the research aim to influence a *particular* policy or the broader debate?
- b What is the time span of the research strategy?
- c What is the time span of the communication strategy?
- d Do you need a country-level strategy or one that has a common focus across countries?
- e Who will be affected by the strategy's implementation? How will they be involved in its development? Ideally, the development of a communication strategy will be part of research proposals and budgets.

Step 3 – Develop your media engagement plan

Consider options for media engagement at different stages of the research process (see table on page 11).

- a** Identify your media aims for different stages of the research process.
- b** Work through the potential risks of media engagement and strategies to minimise these.
- c** Identify the resources available (i.e. time, money, people).
- d** Consider the role of individual pieces of research within the broader communication aims; the potential for 'issue fatigue'; and researchers' capacity for communication work.
- e** Devise a long-term strategy (3–5 years) with a more detailed annual work plan.
- f** Allocate roles and responsibilities.
- g** Ensure that flexibility is a principle of the communication strategy, so that you can respond to opportunities that arise unexpectedly.

Step 4 – Implement the work plan

Once the strategy and plan are agreed, the communication work begins. Early consideration should be given to:

- a** Building links with relevant media, NGOs and others.
- b** Building capacity in-house or buying in additional expertise where appropriate.
- c** Allocating responsibility for reviewing and updating the strategy and plan.

Step 5 – Monitoring and evaluation

- Monitor media coverage (e.g. through a media monitoring service; through periodic reviews of a 'slice' of media coverage; or by ensuring that researchers collect their own media cuttings and notes of media contact).
- Gather feedback from staff about their experiences of working with the media and any anticipated or unexpected results.
- Review the strategy each year with regard to research engagement in policy processes and media coverage. Build in any changes needed.
- Periodically review the overall results of media engagement, probably as part of the broader communication strategy. Gather feedback from key stakeholders, internal and external, on the impact the strategy has had on research aims.

Developing a media strategy				
Research process	Communication aim	Possible media roles	Risks and challenges	Mechanisms for media engagement
Identifying the research subject	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Gather input from civil society ■ Build links for future collaboration in research ■ Increase legitimacy ■ Build ownership ■ Check the level of interest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Forum for debate subject ■ Source of information ■ Reach public ■ Stimulate debate ■ Give voice to non-influential groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Limited interest at this stage ■ Build public expectation too early ■ Participation may change research – whose priorities to follow 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Workshops with press coverage ■ Editors and broadcasters roundtables ■ 'Schmoozing' media ■ E-conferences
Launch the research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Information to target groups ■ Build links with NGOs, government, other actors ■ Build supportive and receptive environments ■ Build links with media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Inform diverse target groups ■ Build interest ■ Stimulate debate ■ Show links (if any) to previous work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Build public expectation too early ■ Findings/conclusions unknown – may require sensitive handling if there is a public launch ■ Raise uncomfortable questions (e.g. about cost of research) ■ Limited media interest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Press releases and press conferences ■ TV/radio talkshows ■ Privileged access for some journalists ■ Website and email alerts
During the research process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Build receptive environments in policy and public arenas ■ Build media interest and understanding of subject area ■ Build links with relevant networks and individuals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Information ■ Enable dialogue ■ Facilitate links 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ May influence/skew participation in research ■ May distract researchers from primary role ■ No conclusions – what's the story for the media? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Visits for journalists to research sites, workshops, meetings ■ Informal media contact ■ Materials (e.g. workshop conclusions) to media ■ Contribute to newspapers ■ Webpage updates ■ Email alerts of new findings
Preliminary findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Test receptivity ■ Build interest in final recommendations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Informing ■ Enable dialogue, debate and discussion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Conclusions may change ■ May result in unwanted workload at crucial time of research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Press releases ■ TV/radio talkshows ■ Privileged access for some journalists ■ Involve media in workshops
Disseminating the findings, conclusions and recommendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Disseminate findings ■ Generate public debate ■ Reach policy indirectly ■ Ensure take-up by campaigning and other groups ■ Be accountable to public ■ Build receptive environment for implementation of policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ As above ■ Promote accountability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Researchers lose control on how they are reported 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Press releases ■ TV/radio talkshows ■ Privileged access for some journalists ■ Press conferences ■ Involve media in workshops
Later	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Promote accountability of policy-maker to act ■ Link earlier research to new 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Question stakeholders' action since research launch ■ Enable dialogue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Become old news ■ Researchers have moved on to new subjects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Press releases about relevance of findings to current issues ■ Participation in media events

Conclusion

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Villagers in Mali watching an HIV and AIDS awareness video
NEIL COOPER | PANOS PICTURES

The media can play an effective role linking research and policy. The development of a strategy is dependent on the country context, in particular, aspects of its media, research and policy environments along with the policy and broader communication aims of the research. Carrying out the strategy will require buy-in from across a programme and across country partners, best facilitated by employing a participatory process in developing the strategy and plans. It will also require resources (i.e. time and money), which should be built into budgets and staff time plans.

Media can provide a means to inform particular audiences, be part of a process to build links and alliances with key stakeholders, enable dialogue around research as well as promote debate, accountability and commitment to research findings and recommendations. Media understanding of research can be achieved through building long-term relationships with key media in which there is an ongoing dialogue and where specific materials are produced to enable media engagement with relevant issues.

How to link country and international research communication and media strategies

Development strategies require input from northern and southern stakeholders. Research will often have findings of interest and relevance to both of these. Multi-country organisations can combine efforts in an integrated strategy to influence policies at the national and international levels. An integrated strategy is likely to include components which are both country-specific and international. Stakeholder analyses are required to identify key national and international policy processes and linkages between them. The strategy will also need to take account of the different media at country and international levels and roles they play in policy processes. The practical application of such an integrated approach is limited in research communication and there is very little written about it. However, there are examples from campaigning and private sector communications that may be of relevance. In the short term, research programmes should think through key national and international processes and how to combine efforts at these levels for maximum effect. In the long term, the collection of case studies and more analysis of the foundations of successful communication is required, and should be shared widely.

Building capacity for media and communication approaches in research

There is limited documentation of how research institutes have built communications' capacity and successes in different contexts. However, key elements seem to include the role of incentives and clear division of communications specialist staff. It is also important to get the balance correct between developing a good strategy and building in the flexibility that allows for a quick response to new opportunities to engage with media in connecting to policy processes. Case studies and research into experiences at a range of research institutes and pulling together the experience of other sectors and organisations would be beneficial.

Methodologies for evaluating the impact of media strategies for research at country and international levels

This paper emphasises that processes that influence policy are not linear; any effort to attribute policy change to a particular input is difficult, if possible at all. However, there are methods for monitoring the amount and nature of media coverage and assessing the impact of such coverage (e.g. changes in understanding of relevant issues, reference to research in policy discussions, invitations to participate in policy process). There is limited experience in methodologies for evaluating the impact of media strategies for research at country level and, in particular, in linking media strategies to impact at the international level. A process of documenting the experience of research institutes would assist in building both knowledge-based experience and methodological base.

The literature on policy-making often makes use of cooking metaphors; kitchens and cauldrons abound. Research raises questions and provides evidence and perspectives, which are crucial to improving policy, all vital ingredients in policy processes. The media play an important role in providing information, promoting debate and dialogue and making links between various groups – populating the kitchen and mixing the soup. Experience shows there is a willingness within research and media communities to connect but that this needs effort and resources. Experience also shows that positive results can emerge from well-managed interaction between research institutions and the media, particularly as part of a broader communication strategy. The media can assist researchers in “getting into the kitchen” and the combined efforts and complementary roles of both media and researchers can have positive effects on what the kitchen produces.

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