



CHANGING LIVES: MAKING RESEARCH REAL
INPUT FOR DISCUSSION
REPORTING RESEARCH: CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES

INTRODUCTION

This report is a brief overview of researchers' experience with the media in order to inform discussions at the IPS Africa "Changing Lives: Making Research Real" Forum on February 21 – 22.

While this is not a definitive report it does provide anecdotal feedback on researchers views and experiences with the media.

IPS Africa contacted fourteen researchers of which only eight responded to a series of questions. The researchers included those featured on Changing Lives as well as researchers who had not participated in the project. The questions were:

- Have you engaged the media around your research?
- If yes, please explain the circumstances?
- Did you feel the reporter/s understood the research?
- Did you feel the story accurately outlined the essence of the research?

- What went well in this process?
- If the process went badly, please explain how?
- What was the response from the general public after the article, radio interview, television broadcast etc. appeared?
- What was the response from other researchers after the article, radio interview, television broadcast etc. appeared?
- How could this process have been improved?
- Do you feel you could/should have done things differently?

The seven researchers who were interviewed worked across Africa and provided a general insight into the relationship between the media and researchers from their point of view.

Although responses varied according to the nature of the research that was being presented to the media, numerous commonalities were also documented.

It should be noted however, that when some researchers were approached to answer questions on their relationship with the media, they were apprehensive to speak due to stringent organizational policies regarding the dissemination of information to the media and other organizations. Other researchers also noted the reluctance of their colleagues to divulge information too early which can result in a loss of interest by the media or irrelevance when they do decide to finally engage the media. Others pointed out that the media is not necessarily a measurement of success where researchers are concerned, thus illustrating the reluctance of some researchers to engage the media. Researchers measure their success through peer reviews and journals, among others; therefore, the media is not a major priority.

SHARED EXPERIENCES

Researchers are increasingly engaging the media as an outlet for their research findings with six of the eight participants having used the media as a platform for their research.

Techniques such as press conferences, press briefs and presenting fact sheets to the media about research findings have been utilized by researchers.

However, although the media has been instrumental in getting research findings to a larger audience, researchers still feel that their research is not adequately understood. Most researchers acknowledge that the media does get the general gist of the research but continue to misunderstand key elements of research findings. An example given by one researcher involved research on high yielding technology in the field of agriculture which became mistaken for genetically modified food due to the nature of the article that was written by the media.

Researchers agreed that the media tends to seek headlines which lead to one minor aspect of the research being magnified resulting in the neglect of other important findings. The desire for captivating headlines results in stories that give an inaccurate account of research due to the emphasis on what media deems to be headline worthy. This is a problem that arises mostly with print media.

There is a general consensus that if the media is involved from the onset there is less room for error when they report on research findings. Continual engagement with the press at various levels of research results in more accurate reports. One of the problems highlighted by researchers is that the media publishes reports too soon, they are sent a fact sheet or a briefing and without seeking more clarification or information they publish the story. Where there has been no continuous relationship with the press problems have arisen especially where accuracy of reports is concerned.

One organization, which shall remain anonymous, discovered the importance of a continual engagement of the media after a potentially damaging encounter. The general public in the area in which their research was being conducted had misunderstood the intentions of the researchers and were unhappy about the proceedings taking place. The media caught wind of the distress in the community and went on to publish an article on the research and its effects on the community. This caused significant backlash for the organization who were then forced to contact the media in order to rectify the situation and provide accurate facts. Once the media were involved and understood the research they were able to clarify the misunderstanding. However, although the response from the general public was largely positive after the media had been incorporated, there was still a general feeling that the negative press had already influenced public opinion.

Nevertheless, the press has allowed the general public to be more engaged with research findings. One researcher stated that “the media is a great partner”. Another emphatically commented that “the media is a major outlet for information. We don’t just research for the sake of research; we research to provide a background to key issues affecting society”.

On the whole the media sparks positive responses across the board. Feedback tends to be generated from the general public with less substantial input coming from other researchers. There have been requests from master’s students and university professors in some instances; however this is on a significantly smaller scale and largely dependent on the topic of research.

MITIGATION STRATEGIES

Researchers who had favorable outcomes with the media, adopted specific mitigation strategies in order to ensure that their work was properly reported. These include:

- The inclusion of the media earlier in the process of research.
- Preparation of simplified versions of the research report that contain less technical jargon, making information easier to understand.
- Seeking to improve their relationship with the media by partnering or training.
- The inclusion of media personnel their staff.

The need for better communication between researchers and the media is imperative and has been identified as the area which needs to be most readily improved.

CONCLUSION

The general reluctance of researchers to engage the media – as evidenced by the reluctance even to participate in this survey – indicates that the media itself has a challenge to build the trust of researchers. Their fears included the publication of information that was not yet ready for public consumption, being misquoted or quoted out of context and the feeling that the media has very little interest in the complexities of the issues being raised within the research.

ATTACHMENT: RESEARCH RESPONSES

	<u>Researcher A</u>	<u>Researcher B</u>	<u>Researcher C</u>	<u>Researcher D</u>	<u>Researcher E</u>	<u>Researcher F</u>	<u>Researcher G</u>	<u>Researcher H</u>
Have you engaged the media around your research?	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
If yes, please explain circumstances.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As a means of getting research out. • A booklet was published followed by a press conference to release findings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invited media to make them aware of research. • This was prior to the official launch of research findings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targeted radio, print and electronic media to raise awareness on MDGs and NGO impact on GDP. 	[N.B. was apprehensive about sharing information due organisation policy concerning media]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initially had not targeted media, however a misunderstanding emerged in the community which led the media to inaccurately reporting on research. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Numerous methods have been used to interact with the media. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media is key. Media is a major outlet for our work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research is not yet complete.

<p>Did you feel the reporter understood the research?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes. • Media understood the gist of the research, not so much the details. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well understood in general. • Some journalists misrepresented information but they were few. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes, mostly. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes, once we had contacted media and held press conference to clarify research. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No, most of the time media picks one point of interest. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes, we try to find effective ways to communicate by trying to ensure information is easily absorbed. 	
<p>Did you feel the story accurately outlined the essence of the research?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes, the details were not as emphasised, however, the general meaning of research was understood. • Media was keen on statistics if not too abstract. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research was well captured. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was a mixture. Print media tends to be more concerned with sales so they magnify one aspect of the research only. • During press conferences media representative can ask a single question which deflects from 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes, topic was easily understandable as research was not too scientific. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media tends to pick on minor details and focus on these rather than the entirety of the research. • They pick what they feel would make interesting headlines and most of the time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes, have established relationships with those who write and publish the articles. They usually check back that their information is accurate. 	

			reserch and then makes the headline instead.			this is not the focus of the research.		
What went well in this process?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media response was good. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media released story too soon before appropriate ministry had been consulted. This caused message to be lost in political debate and some media did not remain objective. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On the most part media response was good. • Organisation has engaged media in every step of the process. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Once organisation had engaged media it was a positive experience. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Due to a good rapport with the media they are very supportive and tend to come in large numbers to major events, includes print, television and radio. 	

<p>If the process went badly please explain how?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No negative experiences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some reporters became agents of the ministry in complaining about the research rather than focusing on the research itself. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No negative experiences. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media was too hasty in covering research before clarification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media was too hasty and tends to neglect to consult and clarify information. • Briefs are usually published too soon without enough information. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competition for news coverage means that sometimes important research can be overlooked in favor of other more interesting headlines. Research is not a major media priority. 	
<p>What was the response from the general public after the article appeared?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good response from public and policy makers. The media was very influential. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive response from the public. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interest varies according to the topic of research. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is hard to say, as initial reports had already influenced public opinion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public response was good, it increased public profile and engaged policy makers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback is generally good. Receive emails and calls. 	

<p>What was the response from other researchers after the article appeared?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None that I can remember. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research was placed in a multi stakeholder reference book if needed by other researchers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other researchers do call and request original copies. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other researches made mostly positive comments as they understood the research better. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not to the same degree as public response. • Requests from Master's students and university professors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not as much as general public feedback and researchers tend to be interested in technical questions. 	
<p>How could this process have been improved?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media response was good. • However, media restricted itself to the popular, condensed version of the research. Media did not offer its own critical interpretation of the study. There 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process could have been improved internally to work in conjunction with media and other stakeholders. • Emphasis could have been made on when research should be published. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paper media used to give research allowances now some are demanding payment for coverage. 					

	<p>was no critical questioning of methodology , statistics and subsequent conclusions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is no linking of data with other similar articles. 	<p>Timing is critical.</p>						
<p>Did you feel you could/should have done things differently?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media does not link research with other relevant stories. • They need to ask appropriate questions. • Need to encourage more understanding of research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better communication could have been put in place. 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media should have been engaged earlier in the process. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship with the media is good, however, there is an increasing need to find a way to make information viable for social network 	

	methods to generate more questions. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Researcher should also work on making information more accessible through easier language etc.						media.	
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