

Promoting Research Communication; Panos Eastern Africa's Experience.

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Research, Its use and Communication Pathways.

Information is a right and a tool for sustainable development. For ordinary citizens to become involved in the debate around critical issues that affect them there must be information that will empower them to engage from an informed perspective.

Research is useful for providing evidence based information necessary for civil society, and policy makers to make decisions about key scientific programmes, make policy decisions or changes or for civil society to determine its programme. It is critical to disseminate research information if it is to make a difference.

A great deal of research is carried out each year on subjects that are directly relevant to policy and practice in international development. But how much of that gets to make a difference? Most would agree that the answer is 'not enough'. Too much research stays within the confines of the academic community that produces it, and is locked away in reports and articles that are only read by a handful of specialists (Geoff Barnard, 2006)

The need for research communication cannot be overemphasized. Research can be communicated in a number of ways, through academic journals, university libraries, policy briefs, dissemination meetings among others depending on the audience. Media is most often than not hardly considered as a pathway for research communication. Panos Eastern Africa's experience reveals that the media can be an effective way of communicating research.

This paper will focus on the critical role of the media in communicating research information. It cites from Panos Eastern Africa's experience in bringing together researchers and journalists, it explains Panos Eastern Africa's approach, explaining the benefits, and challenges therein. It builds a case for the extensive use of not just print media but electronic media.

For the purposes of this paper research communication will be restricted to Panos Eastern Africa's experience and will refer to working with the media (electronic and print) as a partner in deciphering research, promoting wider debate of research findings and increasing the uptake and knowledge of research in the public domain.

Communicating research is difficult for a number of reasons. There's a poor match between what researchers do and what ordinary journalists think of as news. Researchers and journalists tell stories differently. Researchers go from evidence to conclusion. Journalists report the conclusion first, then they put in as much detail as they have room for—often leaving out facts the scientist thinks are crucial (Dean, 2009)

The challenges notwithstanding the role of the media is critical and strategic links between researchers and journalists will go a long way in breaking down research outputs and increasing its mass outreach and uptake.

1.2 Why the media is an important stakeholder in Research Communication

The caricature of the researcher cut off in the academic ‘ivory tower’, writing in obscure language, and communicating only with a small circle of subject specialists, is probably less prevalent in the development sector than in some others. But most would agree that communication is not being given the emphasis it needs, and in far too many cases is still a hasty end-of-project activity, rather than being integral to the whole research process. (Geoff Barnard, 2006)

There is therefore need for a systematic approach to communication in order to demystify research. This could be done through a number of ways. In Panos Eastern Africa’s case through the media.

According to a survey done by Inter Media- AudienceScapes¹ in 2009, among media and ICT platforms in Kenya, radio remains the most widely available, reaching directly into more than 85 percent of adults’ homes in the country. About 49% of people in the capital city Nairobi read newspapers as a source of news.

¹ InterMedia conceived AudienceScapes-an online tool and research program providing essential media use and communication information on developing countries from a bottom-up perspective, based on in-depth analysis by the AudienceScapes research team.

Media is the only outlet that reaches the people who would otherwise be left out by mainstream research communication methods. The poor and marginalized have an opportunity to interact with information on radio, newspapers, TV and increasingly new media including social media. The mass reach of the media is unrivalled enabling it to provide platforms for a multiplicity of voices. Panos' network programme called Relay² advocates for a greater role of the media in research communication based on the following premises³

- The media has the potential to promote more inclusive participation in debates around research and policy, providing a platform for a broader range of participants to join
- Broad engagement of researchers with publics has the potential to promote pro-poor policy change and ultimately more open, inclusive and democratic societies
- By engaging with the media, researchers are promoting the development of a public interest media sector that will improve the communication and influence of their research programmes in the long term.
- The media creates awareness of the researchers activities and promotes transparency and accountability
- Helps to generate support for the researcher from various stakeholders and funders
- Ensures that results are shared beyond one organization and are used for the good of society since most research issues are of public interest
- Minimizes unnecessary duplication of work
- Enables researchers to influence public policy in their fields of expertise
- Reduces the cost on the individual researcher of public information dissemination

² This is derived from the word "relay" as used in athletics, used by Panos to describe research communication through the Media. It is a programme implemented by Panos Eastern Africa in partnership with Panos London.

³ Adapted from the Panos Eastern Africa; Media Hand Book for Development Researchers.

Radio for example has the capacity to reach the group of people who cannot read and write. In Uganda, Panos Eastern Africa has over the last 3 years partnered with 26 radio stations to discuss the issue of governance. To promote informed debate the radio journalists were trained on how to carry out basic research, and interview sources of information such as civil society actors, policy makers, researchers. The challenges notwithstanding, this promoted informed debate among ordinary citizens who understand their concerns without necessarily linking it to research.

When it comes to strengthening the links between researchers and the media, it is addressing the question of who the research is for, if it is not the public. Ultimately all research is for the public good. The media raises the debate necessary for research to influence pro-poor policies, and task policy makers to consider using research to influence policy decisions.

Even the act of talking to a reporter is a public service. A scientist may speak for an hour and then end up with only one sentence in the article or on the air. But don't assume the time you invested was wasted. You helped that reporter understand the issue and improved the quality of the report. (Dean, 2009)⁴

Dean (2009) argues that communicating science to general audiences is a public service that is equally as important as doing the science itself. Scientists who explain their work and their motivation help the public understand and deal with what feels like a chaotic rush of technological change

The link between research and policy reform is rarely a straight forward one. Researchers in Eastern Africa may well be advised to resist the temptation to claim outright credit for various

⁴ Book Review: am I making myself clear? A scientists guide to talking to the public. By Cornerlia Dean. www.Educationpr.org/2010/05/26/communicating-research-is-a-public-service.

policy reforms and improvements in the areas of development they research on. What is indisputable, however is the impact of their research on framing the debates around development issues.(Panos Eastern Africa, 2008)

These challenges have influenced Panos Eastern Africa's work with the Media in promoting research communication. Panos eastern Africa sees the media not just as an outlet but a key partner in bringing research into the public domain to promote debate and dialogue on research findings.

2.0 Panos Eastern Africa's Experience

As a Communication for Development Not for Profit Organization working in the East and greater horn of Africa, Panos Eastern Africa in partnership with Panos London has worked to promote research communication through strengthening links between journalists and researchers. This is experience built over the last six years addressing various subject areas such as sexual and reproductive health, tax and governance, economic growth and poverty reduction among others..

This is informed by the fact that sources of information most often do not see communication as a critical part of their work. Researchers glory in their names written on high profile publications even if these publications never leave the shelves of research institutions and are never heard of. There is an existing mistrust between the media and researchers that needs to be broken to allow researchers to leave their "ivory towers" and understand what is required for information to get into the public domain. And ask the important question- who is the research for- if it is not the public? The media on the other hand needs to allay the fears of researchers and show themselves

to be credible in handling research information. It is a question of developing relationships and networks that will lead to more information flowing to the public domain.

Through creative workshops bringing together journalists and researchers to discuss their challenges and opportunities in working together and using practical exercises together to break these barriers and prejudices, that an environment is created for free discourse.

Some researchers object that it's pointless to try to communicate seriously with people whose attention span limits them to a minute or two per item. But if you are interested in reaching an audience, Dean says, you must consider the capacities of that audience.⁵

Using a number of creative methodologies discussed below Panos eastern Africa has successfully brought together journalists and researchers to break the barriers that hinder communication between the two parties and build the confidence of the researchers to work with the media, while building the capacity of the media to decipher research.

The key activities explained below are listed in sequence and explain how Panos Eastern Africa facilitates media and research interactions.

Media Scan

The media and research scan is important to determine existing relationships between researchers and journalists, attitudes, practices and gaps in reporting and covering research on a specific subject. The scan also covers recommendations from both researchers and journalists on what can be done to enhance this relationship. The most recent scans conducted include one focusing

⁵ Book Review: am I making myself clear? A scientists guide to talking to the public. By Cornerlia Dean. www.Educationpr.org/2010/05/26/communicating-research-is-a-public-service Book review. Am I clear:

on economic growth and poverty reduction ⁶in Kenya and Tanzania, and the gaps between researchers and journalists reporting on tax and governance in Uganda and Kenya⁷. The media and research scan forms the basis for evidence based programming and media research engagements.

“Ice breaker” Workshops

These workshops are aimed at “breaking the ice” among the researchers and journalists. They are aimed at breaking the stereotypes that hinder relationships between these two groups, and to allow free discourse. “An ice breaker” is the first in a series of workshops ideally targeting the same group of researchers and journalists. A relatively equal number of journalists and researchers is brought together and a platform created for them to freely express their challenges in working together. During this workshop (of two days utmost) a facilitator leads the researchers to open up about their challenges in working with the media who also open up about their challenges in working with researchers. It is critical that the facilitator is effective in managing this session otherwise it can degenerate accusations and counter accusations. This session is important in creating an environment where discourse can take place. For many of the participants it is probably the first time they are in the same room. This workshop breaks the walls that researchers have built around themselves and create an opportunity for networking and informally having discussions about possible research projects. These workshops should ideally be residential to offer opportunities for more informal discussions during the breaks and in the evenings

⁶ Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction Media and Research Scan- Final Draft Report. Panos Eastern Africa and Panos London

⁷Tax and Governance. Media and Research Scan. Panos Eastern Africa and Draft Baseline Report(2011)

During the workshop the researchers present a summary of any research they are working on, or have worked on to a group of journalists who then have an opportunity to ask questions. This session is videotaped and played back to the group. When this is done, many researchers are somewhat shocked that while they indeed spoke on camera, they never really communicated. Similarly Journalists realize that the questions they asked were not necessarily clear. This discovery of respective weaknesses places the researchers and journalists on a common ground in which both parties realize that learning and working together would benefit all.

Researchers have an opportunity to discuss their fears freely and their hopes of how the media should work to promote research.

Other methodologies used during an ice breaker workshop, include a visit to a media house, to the newsroom, by a group of researchers and journalists. This enables researchers appreciate the day to day pressures that a media house faces to determine what makes the news.

At the end such a workshop most participants find an environment for engagement which is important if researchers and journalists are to work together. The ice breaker workshop is followed by a training explained below.

Journalist and Researchers Training.

This training is aimed at developing trust among researchers and journalist.

Trust: as with any cross-disciplinary team, to work well together researchers and journalists need to trust each other and respect each others' skill sets. This takes time and organisational space

for it to develop. It is an area where senior staff can play an important role in setting the tone (Geoff Barnard, 2006).

This training entails practical skills on how researchers can work with journalists. In recent trainings conducted by Panos Eastern Africa in Kenya and Tanzania, the journalists and researchers had an opportunity to do joint field work on the subject of economic growth and poverty reduction. The areas for the visits were carefully selected to represent the issues that the project was focusing on. In Kenya the participants visited Naivasha flower farms and the Internally Displaced Peoples Camps while in Tanzania the participants visited Bagamoyo a historic city and tourist town. The participants were divided into groups composed of both researchers and journalists and were all tasked to identify a story that they would work on together. At the end of the field work participants take time to develop their stories, and make plenary presentations. An experienced editor takes participants through what a media house would be looking for if they were to publish each story. Participants are presented with edited versions of their stories. If they were to be published by a media house and why presentation, selection of topics, use of photographs are critical things to focus on. Many of the participants had never understood why packaging is important, why story angles are critical why, the media opts to use some stories while leaving out others. Researchers are confronted with the realities that media houses face each day of ensuring that the newspaper sells, or the radio attracts advertisement to cover its costs. The media house is faced with insurmountable demands on their space and their time. Consequently if a research output is to make news it has to be appropriately packaged, and targeted allowing the media house the freedom to edit and adjust the story as necessary. Below are some verbatim observations captured during the trainings.

Before Workshops/Trainings	After Training Responses
<p><i>‘Researchers are happier with the mystery of research terms’</i></p> <p>(Journalist Tanzania)</p> <p><i>‘There is continued patronage at the research institutions and as such making it hard to access information. Many research organizations are doing great work which they keep away from the media. This in return makes it very difficult to report such stories. The malicious eye with which people look at journalists is as a result of misconceptions.’</i></p> <p>(Journalist Kenya)</p> <p><i>“Researchers always take away our ideas and they always keep their documents away from us. A lot of their work is never available to the public and as such they have zero impact’</i></p> <p>(Journalist Tanzania)</p> <p><i>Researchers sometimes have very sensitive information and the protocol in science must be followed. The channels of disbursing the findings sometimes are full of bureaucracies,</i></p>	<p><i>“I thought researchers are unapproachable and live in their own world but after interacting with them here I understand them much better’</i> (Journalist Kenya)</p> <p><i>‘I have always thought researchers are ever serious and self centred, my days of interactions has helped me learn they appreciate our struggle’</i></p> <p>(Journalist Kenya)</p> <p><i>“My relationship with journalists was below terrible and now it has moved up, I will cooperate with journalists to publish my work, and particularly work with Beda of Habari Leo”</i></p> <p>(Researcher Tanzania)</p> <p><i>‘I have felt more understood as a researcher and we are all serving people towards the same purpose and as such should work together’. (Researcher Tanzania)</i></p>

<p><i>and not all researchers have the authority to share findings.’ ‘</i></p> <p>Researcher Kenya</p> <p><i>‘In all these we can’t forget that journalists do not have power like the editors do. Such limitations always affect what stories are used’</i></p> <p>Researcher Tanzania</p>	<p><i>‘As a researcher I have been able to create good relationships with journalists, The field trip was very powerful and has enhanced my awareness and the role I need to play as a researcher to reach out to journalists’</i></p> <p>Researcher Kenya</p> <p><i>‘This workshop has offered me an opportunity to interact and understand others while communicating research. I have learnt a lot as a researcher from people I never thought and more so I am humbled by the extra role others can play to make our work visible. The field work was very useful; working in groups helped me appreciate the role of editors and journalists(Researcher Kenya)</i></p>
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Fellowship Opportunities for Journalists

After a series of Panos Eastern Africa workshops the journalists are provided with an opportunity to apply for a fellowship opportunity to investigate a subject of their own choice that requires undertaking primary research including interviewing researchers. This is aimed at using research to provide evidence for marginalized issues, cover research that has not necessarily been covered, engage researchers as sources of vital information that the media can report on and

receive wider debate and coverage. The fellowship process also strengthens the relationship between the journalists and researchers. Journalist fellows are mentored by a researcher and a senior journalist to ensure that the issues are comprehensively covered. The fellowship takes a period of six weeks, starting with a mentorship workshop focused on a specific issue and how research can be used to raise the profile of the issues that emerge as a result.

Results

A combination of those various methodologies have yielded tremendous results as outlined below.

As a result of these trainings in Tanzania, an online forum for researchers and journalists was formed at (regional-forum-for-researchers-and-journalists@googlegroups.com). The forum has posted a number of pertinent issues in Tanzania in regard to economic growth and poverty reduction and invited both journalists and researchers to participate and openly discuss their ideas. The topics discussed on this forum so far include

- A research Report on institutions providing Micro Finance and micro credit in Tanzania
- “IMF launches Trust Fund to help countries Manage their Resource Wealth- Press Release N0 10/497. Dec 16, 2010
- “Indian investors troop into Tanzania”- what does that this mean for the ordinary Tanzanian?. This article appeared on allafrica.com
- Kikwetes current popularity- 100 days after taking office

The forum has proved useful in openly discussing any new research findings and issues appearing in the media .

For the journalists who have participated in the fellowships, it has been an opportunity to become analytical rather than just report issues at face value. The mentorship from both journalists and researchers ensure that information is adequately covered while still remaining relevant to the media. One such fellow a Final year Journalism Student at the University of Nairobi is currently investigating access to maternal health services through the lens of one unreached woman in Kenya. Using available research on the subject and interrogating existing health policies and the gaps, his feature will be used to amplify maternal health issues in Kenya. Other issues covered by the journalist fellows range from policies governing the Economic Processing Zones in Tanzania, unemployment for youth in Kenya to malaria and sea weed farming in Zanzibar.

An article written by an independent researcher who participated in the workshop can be found on udadis.blogspot.com/2011, guardian newspaper 28th/02/2011. It describes his experience of the training held in Dar-es-salaam in February 2011.

The workshops have created a platform for journalists and researchers to get possible contacts for future interaction. Although that interaction cannot be determined , by the time participants leave the workshops they have had the opportunity to see the other side of each group and are more willing to dare themselves to engage further.

Lessons

- It is possible to bring researchers and journalists together and create a platform for them to engage in free discourse on how to promote research communication
- Building relationships between researchers and journalists takes time and resources. Activities should not be one off interventions but carefully planned and long term. Panos Eastern Africa research communication projects last between 1-2 years each.
- Journalists are not only interested in sensational reporting but are interested in how to report research better
- One on one relationships formed between researchers and journalists formed as a result of the workshops go a long way in promoting research and media interactions
- Researchers are without admitting it struggling to communicate, and are open to discussions on how to strengthen their communication
- Institutionalizing research communication both in research institutions and journalism schools will go a long way in promoting sustained communication of research findings.
- It is useful to have facilitators from both research and journalism, and have practical experiences that will add value to the participants
- To improve coverage of research, it is important to involve editors. Developing one on one relationships with editors provides support for the process

Challenges

- The media is highly commercialized, little or no funding is committed to critical analysis of research. That means that sometimes research is sensationalized or covered uncritically
- Most Media houses are under resourced, understaffed and under much pressure
- Researchers are usually too busy to get into a 2-3 day workshop that would benefit them
- Researchers do not allocate funds for communication- some of those who are available to attend the workshops cannot make decisions on a clear shift in research at institutional level.
- Editors who are critical in deciding what journalists focus on are difficult to get into workshops
- Researchers may have understandable worries about losing control of how their findings are represented since they feel their professional reputation and career advancement may be at stake. Working with communications staff involves a degree of compromise and negotiation on how material is presented and how messages are simplified, and this can be difficult for researchers who are unhappy about 'letting go (Geoff Barnard, 2006)'.

Recommendations

- Researchers should think of how they will communicate their findings at the start of the research rather than at the end as is often the case.

- The need for research and media collaboration should be institutionalised into journalism school curricula. Under-graduate journalism students should be trained on how to investigate research as a valuable source of information
- It is important to involve key stakeholders in the research process, preferably at the stage of formulating research questions, and maintaining these links throughout the life cycle of the project. This helps to ensure the relevance of the research, builds trust, and draws in potential allies who may be able to assist in communicating and applying the results.
- Donors funding research projects should encourage researchers and research institutions to allocate funding not just for communication and dissemination in general but for a systematic, strategic communication of research findings in which the media is a key partner
- Media houses should take keen interest in research projects and allocate resources that support journalists to investigate research
- It is important to involve more participants from radio as most people in developing countries have access to radio and use it as a key source of information.
- Communication should be institutionalised in research institutions and clear systems set in place to deal with the protocol and bureaucracies that come with handling scientific research.
- Researchers also perform a public service when they write a letter to the editor, even if the letter is never published or aired. The process trains one to express yourself tersely and clearly, and the letter helps educate the people in the news room(Dean, 2009).

- Institutions that employ researchers can help too. They should encourage and reward experts who take the time to communicate with the public and participate in public discourse.(Dean, 2009)

Conclusions

In the interest of the public good it is important for researchers and journalists to work together since they both journalists and researchers work for the public interest and can promote debate and increase access to information for people left out of the mainstream process.

Panos Eastern Africa's experience, and methodologies can be replicated to strengthen research and media links on any subject. The lessons can be used to build on existing interventions, programmes and strategies aimed at bringing more research into the public domain.

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