How to communicate research for policy influence

Toolkit Nº4 | Online tools

This toolkit is part of a series addressing different aspects and tools on research communication for policy influence.

Why should you think about digital tools for research communication?

Digital tools (mainly online tools and mobile apps) have shaken the communications field, as they are indeed a powerful way to communicate information. It is in the **capability to produce, coproduce, transmit and receive information that the power of the 'digital revolution' lies** (Scott, 2012). This revolution does not refer exclusively to a specific change in internet technology, but rather to a change in how the internet is used: online tools facilitate participatory information sharing and collaboration on the Web.

Today, **not only are individuals using digital tools for self-expression, but organisations, think tanks, universities and governments are doing so as well**. The speed and scope of recent changes in technologies have become cardinal to researchers:

- A good digital strategy can do three things for research organisations: **(1) improve agility, (2) buy time for under-resourced staff, and (3) provide additional opportunities for collaboration** (Scott, 2012)
- **Digital tools amplify the voice of researchers and make research easily accessible to people** when it comes to disseminating research findings. They facilitate what Scott (2012) called 'being there' approach: instead of expecting people to come to your sites, you can push information to them, through online channels.
- Social networking spaces and blogospheres provide spaces where internet users are already interacting.
- Social media open an opportunity for organisations to **communicate their research directly to stakeholders** and keep them informed on the progress of their work, as they allow reaching people in their daily lives.
- The existing social networks allow **segmenting the audience based on their interests** —language, age or place of residence, among other criteria—, thus they provide prominent circumstances for research organisations to identify effectively how and when to communicate their research.
- Social media, compared to traditional communication tools, not only enable you to share the research and the work you do to a wider audience, but also to **receive feedback and seize a two-way communication flow** too.
- Digital tools also create favourable conditions to **promote an interactive debate** about your research. By creating specific communities around a particularly issue, digital tools enable you to feed ongoing

debates with evidence. So it's not just about the possibility of starting a conversation, but also about the challenge of keeping track of ongoing conversations you could add value to.

- Online tools allow you to better understand what others are thinking about issues related to your research, how they talk about them, what are their major interests and concerns, and so on. Thus, online tools' contribution to **refine what, when, how and to whom you communicate** is undeniable.

- A lot of research is being completed with the help of digital tools and the collection of evidence via the Web. Moreover, you can work online with peers and stakeholders to gather and produce new information.

- Governments are no longer limited to streamlined operations and information provision about decisions and services. They are increasingly employing digital tools to foster citizen participation in the public decision-making processes.

Thus, if you want to produce robust and far-reaching research, you may start by seriously considering incorporating online tools to your research and communication strategies. You may need to use such tools into all research phases: online tools "have much broader potential supporting all research phases, from issue mapping, through communication with research stakeholders, to dissemination of research results. (Cinco and Novotný, 2011)"

Don't overestimate the influence of digital tools!

Producing viral content is not easy. Moreover, the impact that can be achieved in the virtual world does not necessarily guarantee of the same effect on decision makers. Therefore, it is key not to overestimate the power of social networks, and, at the same time, understand how the organisation can bring and take value from the discussion online. An online strategy is a great opportunity to support your discussions and your credibility.

Challenges of digital communication

It is true that communication and information sharing and producing have become much easier with Web 2.0 tools and social media. However, it must be noted that, like any communication channel and manner, digital tools also present some challenges in terms of helping research inform policy:

- Lack of the needed **skills and knowledge** of most researchers to make the best of digital tools.
- Persuading research-oriented staff of the effectiveness of communicating about their work in different formats
- **Digital tools change so fast** that it is difficult to keep track of the latest releases when most of your time is devoted to producing good research.
- These media imply **losing a certain degree of control over messaging and branding** (for example, staff may tweet freely about their work), which can have potential consequences for organisational and personal reputations.
- Communication without barriers creates some sort of **'information abundance'**,

making it hard for users to pick up the most relevant, robust and best quality research; which in turn stiffens competition, not only among individuals, but also among organisations and policy research institutes.

- Useful and effective, online tools are not enough to design an advocacy strategy that involves all decision makers. There is a need to **complement them with varied traditional communication tools**.

Encourage the use of online tools in your organisation: ODI's experience

Many researchers are suspicious of new technology. ODI's solution to empowering its staff in digital tools was making online activities central to research, from start to finish. This bolstered the reputation of individual researchers and that of ODI as well. They created a good argument that they called **'cradle to grey'**, explained by Nick Scott at onthinktanks.org: the "cradle" is the time when research ideas are developed and researchers work together. In the next stage, "life," research is complete, and researchers can publish their work quickly and in multiple formats – a podcast, a video, a blog, an infographic, and so on. Finally, "the grey is the lifespan of the research once it's published. It is immortal. It never goes to the grave." If researchers want their long tail to grow, they can post their research to Wikipedia, they can upload their publications to "archiving" sites, or they can release it all under a creative commons license.

Source: Nick Scott at onthinktanks.org (2012)

Creating an online identity for your organisation

Before delving into the different online tools that you may use to further communicate your research and ideas, you should be aware that **all online activity should be coherent with your organisation's identity**.

Thinking about the organisation's online identity entails asking some of the following issues:

- What type of content will the organisation disseminate to create value in a network (research findings, information about research-related events, debates on certain policy issues, etc.)?
- What is the purpose of the material that will be broadcasted? (Inform, promote, call to action, raise awareness, etc.)
- What is the appropriate tone for each type of content?

Also, since in general social networks promote a more informal and human language, it is important that the person managing social networks knows how to effectively manage the tone of his organisation in its communications. **Over time, the consistency in the activity and tone of the organisation in the digital world will build a solid and recognizable profile for those interested in its work**.

The following tips can be considered when trying to forge an online identity for your organisation:

- ✓ **Be clear on what action you want your community to take beyond discussions** – specify what your goals are in using online tools and guide your audience towards them.
- ✓ **Integrate face-to-face activities with online activities** – organize networking events if possible. Think about ways and opportunities to shift the online linkage, once established with policy makers, to offline.
- ✓ **Shift the offline to online** – think about offline materials such as brochures, leaflets, campaigning activities that will encourage people to browse what is going on online.

✓ **Repackage information to fit online environments**– remember that research reports will not satisfy all your online audience. You need to present your information differently (i.e. use interactive tools, audio and video content, visualize information, chunk your content by presenting it in portions rather than as one large page). It is easier for your audience to comment on a few pages focused on a specific issue rather than on a full research report.

✓ **Combine tools**. It is important to select and **use a variety of online tools and spaces that complement each other**. Tools reach their maximum potential when they are used together. For example, Twitter can be used to find (research) and disseminate (communication) information, and keep team members connected and informed of a project's activities (management). DropBox or Google Drive (the new version of Google Docs) can be used to collaborate in the drafting of a study (research), to store the public versions of key documents (communication), and as an intranet for an organisation (management).

Source: CIPPEC based on Cinco and Novotný and onthinktanks.org (2012).

Online communication channels and tools for policy research institutes

Below we share some online tools and channels recommended by Mendizabal at onthinktanks.org[1] (and add others). **Not all the tools are appropriate for all organisations; each must choose the most appropriate mix according to its communication objectives**. Similarly, not all tools will be useful for all projects or initiatives of your institution. **The preference for one tool or another will be based on the message you need to convey, the audience you want to target, and the content you want to broadcast**. Take into account that many digital media are also differentiated by the comparative advantages of each format (pictures, text, videos, data visualizations, etc.).

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1   For further information see: http://onthinktanks.org/2012/08/20/communication-options-for-think-tanks-channels-and-tools/

Tool/Channel	What is it?	To inspire
Emailed Newsletter	Announces the organisation's past, current, and future activities (including publications and events). It is simply informative and should direct the reader to other materials.	European Policy Centre: http://www.epc.eu/pub.php?cat_id=8
Organisation's Website	Provides information about the organisation and brings together all the organisation's communication efforts. While it is an important point of reference, the website should not be considered as the main online communication vehicle for the institution.	Centre for Poverty Analysis: www.cepa.lk Rimisp – Latin American Center for Rural Development: http://www.rimisp.org/en/ Overseas Development Institute: www.odi.org.uk
Blog	Acts as a channel to announce and introduce new research outputs and events. A blog can be the main channel to publish opinions and reading lists, as well as highlighting new videos, podcasts, and other multimedia produced by an organisation.	GDNet Blog: www.gdnetblog.org On think tanks: www.onthinktanks.org Politics & Ideas: www.politicsandideas.org Goran's musings: www.goranspolicy.com Africa Research Institute: www.africaresearchinstitute.org/category/blog/ Wildlife Research in South Africa: www.gvisouthafrica.blogspot.com.ar Envision Asia: www.researchpanelasia.blogspot.com.ar Nexos : www.nexos.cippec.org
Twitter Account	Can be used for several objectives, such as: announcing new publications or events, filtering information on a given policy or research issue, encouraging discussion with other Twitter users, and so on.	Center for European Policy Analysis: @cepa Institute of Economic Affairs: @IEAKenya CIPPEC: @cippec
Facebook Page	Offers the organisation the opportunity to engage with a general audience in a more informal manner. The page can feature recent publications and events by the organisation and third parties.	Politics & Ideas: a new think net: https://www.facebook.com/politicsandideasathinknet
LinkedIn	Provides the organisation with up to date information of its staff that can be featured in the 'about us' page of the website.	European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM): http://www.linkedin.com/company/ecdpm
Google Plus Page, Google Hangouts and G+ Communities	Messaging and video chat platforms	Grupo FARO: https://plus.google.com/+grupofaro/posts CIPPEC: https://plus.google.com/+CIPPEC/posts
Youtube channel for videos and MOOCs	Can be used to present a summary or key findings of a study or project. They can offer the researchers the opportunity to explain their research methods, emphasise key findings and recommendations, illustrate their arguments, and add subtitles in a simple way.	CIPPEC: http://www.youtube.com/user/fcippec
Ustream for 'webstreaming'	Provides video streaming services	

Flickr or Picassa	Help organize, edit, and share photos.	
ITunes for pod-casts	Can present information and ideas in a different for-mat. In most cases it will be possible to produce videos and podcasts at the same time (using the audio of the video).	
Scribd for documents	Allow the organisation to upload its publications to the web in an easy format and service.	Overseas Development Institute: http://es.scribd.com/odi_development
Google Drive or Dropbox for intra-net and sharing documents	Allow an institution to organise common folders and documents and share them with its staff and external collaborators.	
Survey Monkey	Allows creating and publishing online surveys, and viewing and analysing their results	
Wikipedia	Global and open repository of knowledge	
RSS feeds	Is a computer code that Website owners can add to their sites to make them easier to scan by users.	
E-learning plat-forms	Platforms that use electronic media and information and communication technologies for educational pur-poses. Allow broad inclusion of trainees.	VIPPAL: http://www.vippal.org/cursos/index.php?version=v15

Source: CIPPEC based on onthinktanks.org.

Among these tools, you may first consider using blogs and Twitter due to their advantages and opportunities in terms of enhancing the way you communicate your ideas, that we describe next.

Communicating research through blogging

Blogging represents a modern way of announcing and introducing new research outputs; in other words, **it makes your work more visible**. Blogging can also be your main channel to publish your own opinions, the policy actions that you would like others to consider, or to share talking heads, videos and audios you find relevant for a specific topic.

Blogs present an easy tool that can help you set up a website (personal, research group or research project site). If you manage a blog effectively, you can **build a community of readers**, to whom you can spread your work to. Additionally, this following can bring new ideas and perspectives to your research throughout its different phases.

One significant advantage of blogging is that you can learn and practice communicating your work to **an audience that goes beyond the academic community**: it may include other bloggers and opinion-leaders that can provide you with input through their comments and discussions. Another good practice to make your blog post more popular is to tweet about it, as we will explain below.

Don't overload your audiences!

Very often, organisations tend to overload their communities with too much information, thereby making their communication efforts futile because followers are unable to process all of the information. Rather, **think of questions and issues you would like to raise** because the more discussion you can generate, the more attention you will draw to your key findings (and the more valuable feedback you will get).

Some tips to encourage debate in a blog

✓ **Language**. Because of its wide readership, your blog should have a universal in tone; your layout and language must be accessible and informal to encourage comments and debate. Avoid the 'authoritative' writing style.

✓ **Length**. Blog posts must be short (not more than one page in length) and include hyperlinks and multimedia such as videos, audios, documents and presentations.

✓ **Content spinning**. Link your blog to your profile on other digital tools, such as Facebook or Twitter, so that a new post automatically appears on other platforms.

✓ **Use blogs smartly**. Do not limit the use of your blog to announcements on events or new publications.

✓ **Repackaging**. Repackage your content in a way that makes sense to readers who are unfamiliar with the topic.

✓ **Writing style**. Remember that development is about people, so keep your writing human – use the active voice.

✓ **Correction**. Acknowledge mistakes you may have made. Post an apology or a correction – it shows you are transparent. Remember that those who point out your mistakes are your readers, so acknowledge them when correcting mistakes.

✓ **Share new thoughts**. Never assume that your readers have already read what you have written earlier –if you have new thoughts after the original post was posted, do not hesitate to write a new post, simply make sure you link it to the original one.

✓ **Be organized**. Make sure you organize your content using categories and tags.

✓ **Tagging** is about relevance rather than quantity – tag every post with all the relevant tags to make it easier for your readers to find what they are looking for.

✓ **Linking**. Link to other relevant blog posts and sites when possible and make sure the links open in new windows so that your reader does not get lost.

✓ **Update your blog**. Set up a blog only when you are sure of your ability to provide regular content to update. Outdated blogs lose their readers!

✓ **Quotes**. Use speech marks or italics if you are quoting someone directly, make sure you are getting the quote correctly. If you don't have the complete quotes then paraphrase it. Cite your sources!

✓ **Management**. The communications leader or the online communications manager should manage the blog, but members of the staff should have access to post.

For examples of blogs addressing policy research issues, see the chapter of online tools and channels above.

Connecting and networking online through Twitter

Twitter is often referred to as the **text messaging service of the internet**. As a form of free micro-blogging that allows users to send and receive short public messages called 'tweets', it has become an invaluable tool for researchers communicating progress on their work, research findings, or just expressing themselves. Twitter can be used as a professional networking tool, to create awareness about yourself as a researcher and disseminate your latest findings to a targeted audience. Tweets are typically quite short, only 140 characters long, including links. By following other people and sources you are able to build up an instant, personalized news feed that meets your full range of interests, both academic and personal.

Tweets are used to convey meaning in a short, concise way, to arouse the curiosity of our followers and prompt them to read your tweet and click on the link you've attached. Via Twitter, you can **notify** others about new publications and new developments on research projects, **comment** on and **share** relevant government policy changes, reports, articles, as well as **directing** your followers to your content posted on other digital tools (i.e. a new blog post on your blog or your organisation's website). Moreover, Twitter can be your ally in reaching out to external audiences and making links with practitioners in government, media and public policy domain.

To maximize the opportunities offered by this tool, follow Twitter best practices: **write short and direct tweets, provide links for further reading, use hash-tags to link your tweet to all tweets written on a specific issue, signal other users directly, retweet other people's contents, and build lists to group the contacts you follow and keep better track of their activity** (Mendizabal, 2012)[2].

Some tips for tweeting effectively

✓ Keep it **short and simple**! Make it easy for your followers to retweet your tweets.
✓ Use programs such as Bitly.com to shrink links so you can include them in your tweets.
✓ Hashtags are the # sign used before a specific word that you would like to highlight. They allow tagging tweets, thus grouping them with millions of other tweets submitted by others. Using hashtags allows you to make your tweets visible to millions of Twitter users who are addressing the same topics as you

are (e.g. #development, #publicpolicy, & #sustainabledevelopment).
✓ **Mentions** are another powerful way of bringing your tweets to a wider audience. Mention other relevant organisations or individuals when tweeting about a specific topic.
✓ Decide the **time** to tweet with the region and the audience you are tweeting to in mind. Take into consideration the time difference.
✓ Vary the time – don't always tweet at the same time.
✓ **Do not overwhelm** your followers with your tweets–select your tweets and prioritize!
✓ Take into consideration how hot the topic is and how frequent people are tweeting about it (i.e. in some cases, sending a tweet every 15 min rather than every hour is more effective).
✓ Do a screening exercise of the relevant organisations tweeting about a specific topic.
✓ When tweeting about a blog post, **mention** other organisations, **direct** them to the post and **encourage** them to comment on it.
✓ The communications leader or the online communications manager should manage the Twitter account, but members of the staff with their own account should seek to engage with it too.

Source: CIPPEC based On think tanks and Mollett, Moran and Dunleavy (2011).

The two tools addressed above are basic functions available in the online world; digital tools can do much more for you! Hence, if you are interested in navigating the different Web 2.0 tools, **think digital and be digital**. Digital tools in research are not about adding extra work to what you are already working on; they are about **easing the way you communicate your research, making it more accessible and influential for a broader audience**.

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2   For further information see: http://onthinktanks. org/2011/07/28/in-praise-of-twitter-5-ways-in-which- it-can-help-think-tanks-filter-announce-search-net- work-and-argue/

If your budget is tight...

Designing and implementing a good digital strategy is very intense in terms of human resources, since you must have a member on call at all times. If an organisation doesn't have the resources, it is recommended to allocate its staff time to writing in the press or appearing in television rather than to writing on the internet, as the former can be reproduced on the web. To make good use of digital communication, Laura Zommer (2012) recommends **reproducing discussions** all the time on social media and on the internet. However, this entails a significant **change in an organisation's culture**, since you'd need the whole organisation to respond immediately to potential interactions in the web. If you are not convinced of making that effort, a good choice is to map how the internet works in your country, and later associate yourself with those institutions, mediums or individuals that can make your research visible at the right moment (Zommer, 2012).

On the other hand, you **don't need to create new online spaces every time**. There are many tools that you could get for free (i.e.: Word Press, Twitter, Facebook, Google plus). And you don't need to reinvent the wheel: you can reuse what you have wherever and whenever you want.

Source: VIPPAL (www.vippal.cippec.org).

Avoid new communication channels that are not linked to your core business

Organisations, think tanks and research institutes often adapt their agendas to funding possibilities. Thus, sometimes, organisations investigate topics and implement projects that are not necessarily related to their mission. In such cases, Laura Zommer (2013) recommends the following: **avoid generating new communication channels and developing regular dissemination tools, which, if they**

happen to be successful, will create demand for content that will only be available while the funding lasts. Discontinued newsletters, web sites that are no longer updated, but still appear in search engines, databases with information from two or more years ago, blogs with old entries without comments and social network accounts without followers or friends or rich exchanges are all terrible windows to the organisation.

Source: Politics & Ideas (www.politicsandideas.org).

Monitoring and evaluating research communications using digital tools

Finally, online tools also **facilitate M&E communication efforts**. For instance, Google Analytics not only gives you fresh insights on how visitors use your site, how they arrive, how often people visit each page, how long they stay, how you can keep them coming back. Moreover, to track media and blog mentions you can also use Google Alerts; these are email updates of the latest relevant Google results (web, news, etc.) based on your queries.

However, like in any M&E effort, the important issue is to use the information collected effectively. In that sense, it is worth taking a look at ODI's M&E dashboard[3] (Scott, 2012), created to track how ODI outputs are disseminated through their main communications channels fare. This brings together **qualitative and quantitative data collected digitally**. ODI has included data that could give insights into the quality and management of research, which can sometimes determine the success or failure of communications. ODI's aim was to create a set of benchmarks for the organisation, to assess the success in reaching and influencing audiences, to identify what factors led to that success, and **act upon these findings**.

3   See http://onthinktanks.org/2012/01/06/monitoring-evaluating-research-communications-digital-tools/

To continue exploring!

Recommendations from CIPPEC

- *Using social media: research communications and the development dialogue,* Overseas Development Institute, 2013.
Available at: www.odi.org.uk

- *Digital strategy can support communications in think tanks. But can it also improve their research and management too?,* Nick Scott, On think tanks, 2012.
Available at: www.onthinktanks.org

- *Digital think tanks,* Enrique Mendizabal, On think tanks, 2012.
Available at: www.onthinktanks.org

- *An introduction to digital research communications,* Nick Scott, Overseas Development Institute, 2013.
Available at: www.odi.org.uk

- *Say no to developing new communication channels that are not linked to your core business,* Laura Zommer, Politics & Ideas, 2013.
Available at: www.politicsandideas.org

- *The decline of the corporate website (and rise of a social internet),* Nick Scott, On think tanks, 2012
Available at: www.onthinktanks.org

- *Using Twitter in university research, teaching and impact activities. A guide for academics and researchers,* Amy Mollett, Danielle Moran and Patrick Dunleavy, 2011.
Available at: www.lse.ac.uk

Next Toolkit:
Dynamic formats to communicate research.

- *In praise of Twitter: 5 ways in which it can help think tanks (filter, announce, search, network and argue),* Enrique Mendizabal, On think tanks, 2012.
Available at: www.onthinktanks.org

- *A pragmatic guide to monitoring and evaluating research communications using digital tools,* Nick Scott, On think tanks, 2012.
Available at: www.onthinktanks.org

- *ODI's award-winning online strategy explained, Nick Scott,* On think tanks, 2012.
Available at: www.onthinktanks.org

- Impact 2.0 iGuide - New mechanisms for linking research and policy, Cheekay Cinco and Karel Novotný, Association for Progressive Communications APC.

- *Communication options for think tanks: channels and tools,* Enrique Mendizabal, On think tanks, 2012.
Available at: www.onthinktanks.org

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