

# Never mind the research piece! Considerations for communicating research within policy – Discussion note for a webinar

By Vanesa Weyrauch & Tomás Garzón (Politics & Ideas),  
and Leandro Echt (CIPPEC)

*“There is a party already going on, which you don’t want to miss. Find out where is the venue, who’s attending, what’s the dress code, and only then think about which drinks to bring and share”*

## Is research the starting point?

Research communications practices are generally built on the idea that researchers and their organizations (think tanks, universities, NGOs and other types of institutions) are good at producing research outputs but not so good at disseminating it. Hence, becoming more influential should be a question of tackling the latter. In other words, the starting point is something like ‘we have a great product, let’s get better at selling it’. Within this paradigm, one would be primarily concerned with building capacity to communicate research in a way that makes it easier to cover the distance from a “research piece” to “informing policy”.

The former sounds reasonable. But P&I<sup>1</sup> and CIPPEC<sup>2</sup> believe in **an alternative starting point**, which may help researchers have a better sense of what goes on ‘out there’, away from libraries and offices, at the heart of where policy is crafted: **de-centre the research piece and instead focus on the context of policy and**

**politics**. Crucially, this can help us better reflect on what it means to communicate in such an environment, including our ongoing role and potential contribution.

As the metaphor suggests, we are proposing to think less about what we have in our hands (the research piece, the “wine”) and how to make it more attractive to others, and a bit more about the kind of game we want to join and who is already playing there. This change of perspective enables us to highlight a distinct set of challenges, which in turn may lead us to develop a somewhat different overall communications strategy and, accordingly, a slightly different set of practices.

When we consider the research piece at the centre, we are usually worried about the following set of questions: Why do policymakers **ignore [or pay attention to]** sound knowledge, like the one we produce? **When** should we be prepared to **deliver** the evidence we have produced? What are the **stories to be told** that will resonate with ongoing policy narratives and ideas? What are the **best channels** for our research to have broadest reach? Which are the **changes in format** we should attempt for our

1. P&I: [www.politicsandideas.org](http://www.politicsandideas.org)  
2. CIPPEC: [www.cippec.org](http://www.cippec.org)

pieces to be read and understood? How can we best learn about how well or not we are communicating in order to improve?

These are all important aspects of research communications when we focus predominantly on developing appropriate skills and tools to improve our research piece in meaningful ways. The answers to these questions will help us produce research outputs that are **relevant** to actual policy issues, **timely** in terms of the policy process, easily **accessible** in terms of language and format, and **understandable and useful** for its potential users. These more practical goals will also be addressed throughout this course.

But there is more to think about if we can in fact forget about our research piece for a moment. The following questions are broader but can potentially provide more insight into **the 'big picture' of research communications**. In fact, as a researcher one must develop and deepen its understanding of the rules of the game and the other players:

- Which written and unwritten **principles and practices** guide policy-making in our country?
- What would **influencing or informing policy** mean for me and my organization? Do we agree on the answer? Does it vary according to projects, research pieces, moments, etc. or do we have a general view on how we want to contribute to policy and politics?
- Which players are usually parts of the conversation? How do they **relate** to each other? How can we **establish working relationships** with them?
- When and under what circumstances have **changes in policy** happened?
- How can we improve the way we communicate and **better assess** our work?

In a way, P&I and CIPPEC propose to start off by asking more fundamental questions related to the nature of the policy environment in which a researcher or an organization operates. A sound

contextualized understanding of politics is not something that should just concern researchers explicitly studying political issues (in a scholarly approach). In fact, it should underpin the organization's overall strategy and its communications work, and therefore should be reflected upon by researchers and communicators alike in a purposeful manner.

## What's your contribution?

Once we have a clear idea of the characteristics of the context, it is important to understand how research communication may help us to make a **contribution** to policy discussions. The key word here is 'contribution', which by definition implies that what we bring about to the discussion, whatever its quality, is only one of many elements that will come into play - as opposed to a readily deployable solution to a self-contained problem. In other words, **policy discussions and the politics surrounding them cannot be preempted by a research piece**, no matter how groundbreaking, innovative, conclusive or well-communicated it may be. Hence, it can only be meaningful insofar as we manage to successfully engage with a variety of actors with diverse legitimacies and roles and who may use and interpret **different types of knowledge**-produced by us and others.

## Think broadly to whom communicate

Communications are often oversimplified (or even misrepresented) by illustrating them as a linear, one-way process that flows from A to B. In research communications terms, this would amount to conceiving the researcher or organization as the one who produces a message, and policymakers or key influencers as its mere recipients; the better we know them, the more we can become influential. Provided we find the right channel and eliminate noise, we can get it right.

But the communication of research is a **multi-way process** in which messages, ideas and relationships circulate in a way that cannot be captured by such simple representations. We need to keep in my mind the **dialogical nature of research communications**, which basically means that information is produced as much as it is received and interacts with many other sorts of information and sources.

An interesting question to start thinking about this is the following: **who are the users of your research?** (Carter and Paulus 2011) If we face this question realistically and thoroughly, we will probably realize that our audience is not just restricted to policymakers (i.e. actual legislators and public officials), even if they are of course key stakeholders within our communications processes. Moreover, it is not enough (nor desirable) to just add 'key influencers' to the list. To be sure, it is helpful to address those who have formal and informal power on policy. However, there are many other individuals, groups and organizations that are (or should be) part of this conversation, and in turn the communication of our research should address them too:

- Other researchers, research organizations, intellectuals and epistemic communities, who may take an interest in our research from scientific perspective.
- Academic institutions, universities, professors and students who may work with our research outputs in the classroom and/or become future users.
- NGOs, activists and other civil Society organisations might pick up research, critique it, use it to underpin their advocacy efforts, share it or reformat it.

- Journalists and media, who will pick up on research provided it is newsworthy and formatted in a way that is compatible with reporting practices.
- Specific constituencies that might be directly affected by policy ('end users'). They can also be engaged in the conversation, not least by researchers whose work will impact them.
- Donors seeking to support high quality research with possibility of impact.

As obvious as these groups may appear to be, communicating effectively with them does not happen automatically. To the contrary, it should be explicitly sought after in practical ways, including **being open to co-production of research and knowledge**, and being aware of the processes through which evidence, findings and recommendations can become part of prevailing or new ideas and discourses.

## Some questions for discussion in the Webinar

- Are there actually new ways to improve communications within policy? What should change?
- Which contexts are friendlier for research communication?
- What are the factors that more heavily influence the potential of communications of research within policy?
- Should we reframe how research communications can contribute to policy?
- Is there a need to engage new stakeholders and to do it in innovative ways? Can organizations afford this?
- How can we better learn on communicating within policy?