

Heroes of dissemination

David Walker

Communicating the fruits of social
and economic research to a wider public

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Introduction

'I was surprised how easy it was'. But you need 'a certain toughness of skin'. There's intellectual challenge in it, sometimes even a buzz. It can help 'clean the palate'. The downside is that it may require simplification that renders a complex world in blacks and whites. It can provoke negative reactions from academic colleagues.

'It' is dissemination – the business of communicating the fruits of social and economic research to a wider public beyond the readers of specialist periodicals and academic monographs, students and seminar attendees. Of course dissemination does often involve talking to journalists, blinking in television studios, drafting articles for the press with a maximum length of 800 words or less. But it takes other forms, too. Lecturing to students is dissemination, and researchers sometimes talk directly to the subjects of their studies.

Dissemination need not entail cosying up to media practitioners. "I have never fallen into the rent-a-quote trap", says a very successful disseminator who, by his own account, brushes off most journalists' calls. Media researchers "can make you feel you have been ripped off, that your time is valueless", says another social scientist in the thick of public policy debate. The will to disseminate rests on a bias toward sharing information. The 'how' will depend on subject and personality and media. It is the disposition that counts.

This booklet offers notes on how researchers have fared in the dissemination stakes. Our sample has been successful in talking to the wider public, exposing their own and others' work to the air. By what means? What are the costs, where are the opportunities? Perhaps we can extract from the accounts they give of themselves some pointers as to how others might in their turn unpack research for non-specialists. Dissemination via the media can be a "young person's game", says Professor John Hills of the LSE: perhaps his and his colleagues' experience will help up-and-coming researchers. Disciplines and political circumstances are too diverse to allow a single template to be offered; this is a distillation of diverse experience.

Each has a tale to tell that varies according to discipline, intellectual interests and biography. But from these vignettes emerge some common features in researchers' dealings with journalists, the public, users of research and their proxies. Making specialised work available for public consumption takes skill and dedication. Our disseminators were chosen for their articulacy and self-reflexiveness. The final part of the booklet will try to draw together some conclusions from their reports.



Here, to introduce the mini-profiles, are some of the threads in their experiences and attitudes.

One has to do with a certain norm of reciprocity. Social science research is valued by the public and the media at the same time as the media and public can reward researchers. Academics produce new knowledge, subvert common understandings and present themselves as sources of authoritative commentary. The media sometimes appreciate such skills and qualities; academics' appearance of disinterest and neutrality, too. Journalists and programme makers usually have their own agenda. Fitting in with it, academics can find a place in the sun. This can be a paying proposition. Where research relies on the flow of public funds, researchers may be well advised to cultivate some relationship with the public and its representatives. But if there are reciprocal valuations, that is not the same as symmetry of interest. Researchers may usually have to do more chasing of journalists than vice versa, but there are counter-examples below.

Academics working in any field with a public policy dimension surely need to be open-eyed, ever aware of what the agenda of contemporary public and political interest might be. Those agendas are usually carried in the media so contact with and knowledge of what is in the media become important. Those who aspire to have some sort of impact on contemporaries and fellow citizens will probably need to be active disseminators.

Working with the media has benefits. Dissemination offers the bonus of improving writing style and presentational techniques. Submitting to questions posed by journalists (which may be a fair proxy of those that would be put by the public at large) may expose weaknesses in argument and conceptualisation – sometimes more than questions from peers.

But media and research belong to separate worlds with their own schemes of reward, perhaps even different epistemologies. No one is suggesting researchers have to change their spots. They will take their norms, values and criteria for success from the academic environment, universities, Research Councils and funding bodies. Academics recognise different orders of significance than journalists. Academics and journalists disagree, for example, about time and sentence length. But engagement with the media can be positive. Academics can add to their skill sets, for example in learning how to write pithily to a deadline and how to abbreviate.

It's hard to generalise across subjects and biographies. There is no disseminator's 'career'. John Curtice's surveys of attitudes and voting intentions have always sat squarely within one of the modern media's permanent spheres of interest – the movement of public opinion. For them, broadcasters and newspapers are even willing to pay. Julian Le Grand found his work on the social class distribution of social spending on health hit a nerve – enthusiastic media and political response propelled him into what has become a lifetime's work. Patrick Minford's work with leading politicians led to his being identified in the media as a sort of spokesman or proxy for a partisan position: he had to choose



whether to take the proffered role. Operating in a different discipline from a different political perspective, social policy expert Ruth Lister notes the media are usually interested only in simple messages, not discussions of principle. But John Hills cautions that some research results have to be subject to qualification – they are not black and white. That may mean trying to disseminate through media (the radio, broadsheet newspapers) where subtle and ambiguous messages are likely to be more welcome.

What our social scientists have in common is belief that their work is 'useful', in a broad sense, so deserving the fullest exposition. To be an economic and social researcher is to wish to be heard and attended to by contemporaries. Society is likely to be improved by being better informed about itself; social researchers tend to be meliorists. Debate about the future shape of society or political system is going to be richer if it absorbs scientific investigation and theoretical reflection. For some (for example John Kay and Andrew Dilnot at the Institute for Fiscal Studies, and those such as John Hills who have passed through as researchers) this 'positivist' ambition is built in, it is part of the mission statement of the institution.

That aspiration towards 'enrichment' of public discussion is widely shared among our social researchers. If not a mission, our subjects all have something like a yen to talk, to engage with a wider public, to reach beyond the circles of discipline or academic community to inform (and take lessons from) the public at large and the media.



“What our social scientists have in common is belief that work is ‘useful’, in a broad sense, so deserving the fullest exposition.”



Profiles

John Curtice

John Curtice is Professor of Politics at the University of Strathclyde and Deputy Director of the Centre for Research into Elections and Social Trends (CREST) at Oxford University. He is well known as a broadcaster and writer about polling and elections both north and south of the Scottish border. To the media he fits the bill as an available expert.

He uses a commercial metaphor for the relationship between academics and the media – terms of trade. It is, he argues, an 'interactive' exchange. Academics must not assert superiority; they do not necessarily know or understand more. "You cannot just say our truth is more important than theirs. You need to understand, even sympathise with the journalists' (news) values."

Professor Curtice's psephological studies have given him something journalists commonly lack, which is not just data but an informed sense of how opinion is moving outside their metropolitan fastnesses. It is a deficit the media acknowledge. The media are interested in political outcomes and so in polls and polling; they are even willing to pay for it. Much of Professor Curtice's work goes on behind the scenes, for example helping the BBC prepare its predictions of election outcomes.

“...voters will always use local elections to give the government of the day a bloody nose.”

The Guardian

Schooled as a graduate student at Nuffield College, Oxford, by the doyen of electoral studies, David Butler, Professor Curtice said it came as something of a surprise to him to discover that he was thought to possess a particular fluency in communicating with the public. He had been encouraged to believe that communicating with the public was a natural part of the job. He does not simply aim to talk about his own work, but rather attempts to relate the general body of research and data in his area of social science to current issues in the news.

As for the media's time horizons, he enjoys doing things quickly to a deadline. "It's good to submit to the discipline of putting it on paper; succinctly." It's not work you do for the financial reward, though there is some money in it. "I work," he says, "on the basis of certain rules for dealing with the big bad world, including or especially political parties." His working aphorism is that "what you tell me is confidential but what I tell you is not". Everyone can ask for advice: everyone who asks gets the same advice – politician or journalist.



Andrew Dilnot

Andrew Dilnot is Director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies. He is one of the regular presenters of BBC Radio Four's *Analysis* programme and a frequent contributor to television, radio and newspapers on public money and its management, not least around Budget time. Journalists and editors turn to him regularly for background and interviews.

It is part of the IFS's institutional remit to provide advice and data to the public and policymakers. This entails interacting widely with the mass media, answering questions and providing analyses. It's a mission, he says wryly, to save the media from the consequences of journalists' own ignorance. The IFS is 'on hand', on tap, on call. By dint of being at the Institute a long time (17 years), Andrew Dilnot has become a known quantity, a kind of permanent resource for newsrooms and editors.

He reflects that the biggest issue in dealing with the media is simplification, and academics and researchers are not always willing to unpack or explicate their findings. Yet enthusiasm for communication must not in any way detract from the need to invest large resources in finding answers, which may be complex. Some intensely practical questions – for example to do with the effect of tax and benefit changes on employment – cannot be answered without a large apparatus of research. Andrew Dilnot's precondition for media work is straightforward: knowledge (sometimes hard won) comes before the interview.

Dissemination is rewarding. It offers a chance to influence public and policymakers. As an academic, says Andrew Dilnot, you are rarely going to get your issue on the agenda, but by pushing material into the public domain it can more easily get picked up. Equally you would need, he says, to ascribe staggering weight to the effectiveness of academic forms of communication not to see how important are the media.

It takes special skills to communicate successfully. Andrew Dilnot has acquired them.

Sir Peter Hall

Sir Peter Hall is one of Britain's most distinguished urbanists. Professor Emeritus (until 1999 Director) of the School of Public Policy at University College, London, and Professor Emeritus at the University of Reading and the University of California, Berkeley, he was a special adviser to the Secretary of State for the Environment in the early 1990s.

The yen to disseminate, says Sir Peter, is "a personal thing ... I have never been comfortable just with academic audiences and always tried to write using comprehensible language". He has worked extensively with professional planners and so needed to speak in a non-academic language they would find intelligible. Similarly



politicians: communication with them (necessary if they are to be advised and public policymaking improved) has to pass the 'one sheet of paper' test. Research results have to be set down succinctly and clearly.

Sir Peter makes a general critique of social science academics. Too often they talk only to each other in 'hermetically sealed languages'. They produce work which "doesn't tell me what I want to know", locked up, impenetrable. But he

“Three out of five of the world's population will live in cities by 2025.”

The Guardian

acknowledges there may be a generational dimension to such criticism: he is full of sympathy for younger academic colleagues who have to obey research assessment exercises and may face penalties unless they publish only in recondite journals using what he calls the approved, restricted speech code.

'Cultural opportunity' can be important in dissemination too. In the 1960s, he recollects, there was great public interest in planning and urban sociology. It was easy for him – he was even encouraged – to seek to communicate more widely, for example by writing for the magazine *New Society* to be read by both academics and the public (including policymakers).

He has no complaints about how over the years he has been treated, either in media interviews or in submitting material for publication in the press. Indeed he still talks of the 'buzz' that you can get from writing to a press deadline in lay language. But we do need to acknowledge shifts in the media agenda, he says. Newspapers and broadcasters are nowadays far less interested in planning, urban affairs and local government than, say, two decades ago. Local government, planning and urban affairs are now located inside a 'Bermuda Triangle' of media indifference.

John Hills

Academics are willy-nilly in the communications business, asserts

Professor John Hills, founding Director of the ESRC Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE) at the London School of Economics. When they teach or talk to colleagues or policymakers, they are reaching out. Dissemination via the media is part of a continuum. The general task is about putting messages across, explaining a problem and its possible solution "in such a way that it makes sense to an audience, reaching a conclusion forcing you to say what it all means".

Various models can be applied to the relationship of research and policy. He likes Pat Thomas's 'limestone' model, where research drips through and may take 50 years to reach political bedrock. Yet other research emerges fast and affects the policy debate quickly; he notes how work at Loughborough University on the cost of raising children influenced changes in income support rates. Others suggest the aspiration of the social sciences ought to be to change the questions, alerting people to problems they might



not have noticed. All such models put a premium on the activity of communication. Besides – he adds – dissemination is enjoyable: he loved working with the designers of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's *Findings* series which inspired the Centre's own series of briefs.

Journalism had tempted Professor Hills early on – he applied for a traineeship with Thompson newspapers and got an interview with the BBC. Instead he went to work in Africa, in the Botswana Ministry of Finance, before becoming an adviser to House of Commons Treasury Committee and then moving to the Institute for Fiscal Studies specialising in public finances and the taxation of savings.

“ The big question is whether it is equality we are worried about, or whether it is some concept of poverty. ”

Independent on Sunday

His work for the IFS got wide coverage, even in the London listings magazine *City Limits*; he appeared with Brian Walden on *Weekend World*. This turned out to be a 'very interesting' experience, as during each take he added a proper academic qualification to his answer and each time they tried again to get the unadorned answer they wanted: they got it on the eighth take when he was tired. "The TV problem is that it is black and white, unlike radio there is no shadow." This points to the need for caution. Even with basically friendly media, some messages are 'too dangerous' for television in that they do need qualification. (Television moreover can be an arrogant medium, capable – he cites some editions of the *Panorama* programme – of misrepresenting results, although this has not happened to his own work.)

He recommends an active strategy and the benefits of having to boil down research. Perhaps active dissemination via the media is a young person's game – if you want research covered you need to be prepared, to get up early to sit in studios. The thing is to register in people's mind that new research exists, even if they only follow it up in two months' time. One solution is to write articles yourself.

John Kay

John Kay is a business economist. He was Director of the Said Business School at the University of Oxford, a successful consultant and founding Director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies. He writes a regular column in the *Financial Times*. For him broadgauge communication is 'an article of faith' since "you can't engage with the world around without talking to people". That comes, in part, from his approach to his discipline, and also from his empiricism, for communication is a way of broadening experience. He believes the Institute for Fiscal Studies pioneered the engagement of academic economists with the press: what is nowadays commonplace was novel 20 years ago.

Dissemination has its costs, he says, and they have to do with loss of the 'fine detail' of research in pushing it out to less knowledgeable or sophisticated audiences. The



rewards of translating and transmitting knowledge have to do with enriching (and clarifying) the environment within which the ideas behind commercial and public policy are formed. Unless academics make the effort to reach out to the business community, the field may be left to the authors of the sort of works found on airport bookshelves. Besides, a sort of dialectical relationship between journalism and academic work can be established. This is a point also made by Patrick Minford, himself a newspaper columnist. Columns provoke reader responses; columns identify gaps in the academic literature. A demand is created for new academic work, empirical or theoretical development.

John Kay says he actively enjoys the processes of "getting complex ideas over to the public". But capacity to communicate is not built in. For him, it was a chance discovery. In the 1970s, during his involvement with the Meade report on taxation, he found he both liked and had some ability in this form of public conversation. It was "a surprise how easy it is". The media can be demanding. As a result, he has tried to follow the rule that "if I don't have an original angle on a subject, then I won't talk about it. That means resisting blandishments of people to come on television." It may also be necessary to suspend otherwise lively criticism of the shortcomings of the British newspaper press, however justified: if you regard the press as a hostile force, it will pay you back by irritable treatment.

Julian Le Grand

Dissemination is cumulative, says Professor Le Grand, a social and public policy specialist at the London School of Economics. A paper by him in the late 1970s on the social class distribution of health spending got picked up by first *The Guardian* and then the BBC – and then opposition MPs. Two things ensued. Professor Le Grand became convinced that distributional issues were exciting, and he was launched on a high-profile media career.

After lecturing at Sussex, the LSE and the School of Advanced Urban Studies at Bristol, Professor Le Grand returned to the LSE in 1993, convinced that engagement with the media is a good mental and academic discipline, forcing the exposition of problems in clear, everyday language.

But he considers he paid a price for his engagement through the media with issues of social and political controversy. His celebrity

may have cost him academic promotion. Colleagues can get jealous. As reported to him, senior economists had been heard to worry that he was 'more famous' than them. Writing clearly when most academics do not "can also make you look banal, superficial"; academe sets a lot of store by Pascal's maxim, *soyez obscur*.

“The advantage of private investment is that it turns patients into consumers and gives them a greater sense of ownership.”

The Independent

A public profile can have political consequences, too. Although Conservative MPs had relished his early work on maldistribution of health resources, in the 1980s talk of 'equality' had become suspect. He suspects he might even have been blacklisted for



government consultancy work. The media, however, were very interested. He worked with the *World in Action* team on ways of making social class differences in public spending and access to services understandable, using the analogy of a lottery throwing up consistently unequal results. Television finds it hard to handle figures. It is a tabloid medium, Professor Le Grand says, but that does not mean it cannot treat important issues. "The challenge is in how to deliver the message."

But television's techniques need watching. He felt himself traduced in the early 1990s by the programme *On the Record* when he was both (wrongly) identified as a 'close adviser' of a Labour shadow minister and then had only critical elements of an interview excerpted. Newspapers offend here too. *The Sunday Times* deliberately ignored his caveats about his acquaintance with Tony Blair as leader of the opposition in order to paint him as 'having Tony Blair's ear'.

The moral is try to give only live interviews and insist on knowing how it is to be labelled on screen.

And yet academics can be too precious. As long as interviewees remember that their interest is not the same as that of the programme makers, journalists generally ask good questions. He likes their company (and did once, as a Sussex student, consider joining a national newspaper).

Ruth Lister

Dissemination, however desirable, can be a casualty of the sheer volume of academic work, says Ruth Lister, Professor of Social Policy at Loughborough University and veteran poverty campaigner. In the 1970s, the Child Poverty Action Group produced pioneering studies of welfare and income distribution. "People looked to it to give a lead." Now, social policy has expanded as a discipline; the quantity of research has grown and the 'novelty factor' has diminished. Time and effort have to be put into servicing the academic machine and wider dissemination may take second place.

And yet dissemination has also to be understood as the step child of political climate. Government interest in poverty and redistribution has waxed, waned ... and may be waxing again.

With a degree in sociology from Essex University, Ruth Lister joined the Child Poverty Action Group in 1971, becoming its Director eight years later, before moving to Bradford University as Professor of Applied Social Studies in 1987. Though, in the 1970s, the then Director of the CPAG, Frank Field, did much of the organisation's publicity work, a share fell to Professor Lister – enjoyable and nerve-wracking in variable proportions, she recalls.

As a campaigner the priority was to get things over as simply as possible. There was then a ready market for the poverty group's research reports, sometimes commanding entire pages in *The Guardian*. Later there grew up a sense of 'yet another CPAG pamphlet'. In such a climate you have to fight harder to get attention.





“The media are not usually interested in principles, they want lists of winners and losers.”

Dissemination in this area has to work with the biases of the printed press. Take, says Professor Lister, the review of welfare instigated by Tory Social Security Secretary Norman Fowler: He wanted a debate on underlying principles, but “the media are not usually interested in principles, they want lists of winners and losers”.

Dissemination embraces talking to the voluntary sector and directly to policymakers. The intermediaries, journalists, can sometimes pose problems. It takes patience dealing with them, says Professor Lister. Figures have to be calculated for them and, even more time-consuming, the basic system of social security has sometimes to be explained. The media do not want ifs and buts. They want clear messages, even though the material does not always throw up clear messages. Professor Lister joins colleagues in warning against the rapaciousness of television researchers, who tend to use academics as unpaid assistants, giving them no credit at all.

To spend time on dissemination means being willing to play within the rules of the academic system. Points towards the Higher Education Funding Council’s research assessment exercises are the goal. The trick is to ensure that material gets recycled, elaborated for the audience within the disciplines of sociology and social policy as well as being presented through journalism. The worlds are different. “Take the Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s *Findings* series”, she says. “They had an impact in government circles but could not be put forward for the REA.”

Of course not all research is suitable for launching into the public domain. “Sometimes, it is a matter of keeping quiet.”

Patrick Minford

Patrick Minford is an academic economist who after many years at the University of Liverpool is now at the University of Cardiff Business School. Coming from – his own phrase – a non-orthodox background after spells in industry and government, he became an informal adviser to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. He writes a column for the *Daily Telegraph*.

Dissemination, he says, is itself a discipline. To write for lay readers of newspapers is to be forced to put things ‘a different way’, to explain. Dissemination is useful for teaching. It is ‘intellectually provoking’ to have to think widely enough to fill his newspaper column. Readers write in with suggestions and questions, and that too can be useful. Lay communication is not something he took to naturally, but with the passage of time he feels he has acquired the requisite skills. “Writing a column is harder than it sounds – you have to guard against making a complete fool of yourself – everything, however apparently trivial, has to be checked.”

Television, meanwhile, is a great finder-out of cant and insincerity: it is important, especially in terms of the broadcast media, to be yourself.

As well as skills, however, you need to have energy, to make the effort to get into the broadcasters’ studios and meet the demands of journalists – they can keep you up all



night. Perhaps, he muses, dissemination is more of a young man's game. His preference is for more reflective output such as Radio Four's *Analysis* programme.

Professor Minford was catapulted into celebrity (notoriety, he chuckles) thanks to his connection with Prime Minister Thatcher. And perhaps because of the party political colouring, he registers how acquiring a public reputation and becoming a controversialist can put backs up among academic colleagues. They tend to model an economist's career so that he or she first does research and writes peer-reviewed journal articles and monographs. It is considered presumptuous to offer expertise outside the academy 'too early'. On this reckoning dissemination work is something that only more senior researchers should do.

Yet the strength of his own belief in the virtues of dissemination suggests he personally does not think much of the career plan. There is intellectual benefit in having to summarise an argument, to re-present findings in intelligible language: holes can be exposed. Perhaps, he muses, if all journal articles had to be accompanied by a half-page summary intelligible to lay readers they would be much improved.

Danny Quah

Danny Quah is a Professor of Economics at the London School of Economics and, true to his discipline, weighs the costs and benefits of active dissemination work. Costs there are, foremost among them time, "the unforgiving constraint of finite time and resources", as he puts it. To give lectures, to talk to journalists, attend think-tank conferences, confer with public officials, pop into broadcasters' studios – all to be considered as dissemination – mean expending time and energy which academic disciplines and institutions might prefer had been used for something else, notably contributing to peer-reviewed journals.

Professor Quah stumbled into dissemination, but now seeks to plan how much of his time he allocates to it. Educated in Malaysia, he did his PhD at Harvard. He came to the London School of Economics from Princeton in 1996 as a pure, technical econometrician. It was his interest in macro-economic issues that started him in public communication, together with what he calls the influence of the LSE/London atmosphere and the personal model of economist Paul Krugman. Suddenly, taking ideas to the public seemed an inevitable development.

One of his lectures on the 'weightless economy' was picked up by journalists, leading to invitations to give interviews, further lectures, to advise the Department of Trade and Industry, take part in debates at think-tanks. He now spends up to a third of his year 'on the road' doing dissemination, defined to include consultancy, policy advice, and public lecturing as well as media work. (As for media work itself, he recommends that more should be done to train researchers in the ways and wiles of the media – for example training them not to wave their hands about in television interviews and how to keep control of a recorded conversation.)



Yet dissemination can be an 'active enemy' of academic research. Work in economics rests on specialised vocabulary, terse and coded communication. In talking to general, uninitiated audiences "one puts one's professional credibility on the line each time". Up goes the often-heard cry that so-and-so has become a mere populariser: "There is practically no one in the economics profession who has recovered from such a behind-the-back denigration. In many cases, of course, such a label might be well deserved. But I suspect in many other examples there is an undeserved tainting – more and more we've become less and less accustomed to the idea that general all-round excellence can match specialised proficiency."

But the British public pay Professor Quah's salary and deserve value for the money, he says. The reward structure, however, needs to recognise what is involved in dissemination. Society has to make it apparent that it values communication and make it profitable for social scientists to branch away from confined discourse with their peers. There need to be substantial incentives to tempt even a mediocre researcher away from the kudos attached to having yet one more mediocre publication in a mediocre professional journal.

“ In this country there used to be a wariness of enterprise, a fear of failure. There is a sea-change in that attitude and it's mostly among young people. ”

Sunday Times

Attitudes need to change within economics, too, to encourage individuals with a capacity to contribute 'all round' rather than just inside the specialist niche. Until that happens, public communicators and the best peer-acknowledged social scientists are going to continue to be, in the main, two disjointed groups addressing different populations.

Gerry Stoker

For Gerry Stoker dissemination has never been confined to communications media. It is always been about talking directly to – and learning from – practitioners, politicians, and the subjects of his research in government structures and urban administration. Subjects deserve the same level of respect, as interlocutors, as fellow academics (and are sometimes sharper in providing feedback). There is, for him, a continuum between academic work, external conversation and developing policy.

Professor Stoker is a local government specialist. After his PhD in the Department of Government at the University of Manchester, he researched and taught at Birmingham University's Institute of Local Government Studies (Inlogov), Leicester Polytechnic and the University of Essex. At Strathclyde between 1992 and 1997 he headed the ESRC's Local Governance Programme. Influenced early in his career at Birmingham by Professor John Stewart, he professes himself a 'partisan for the cause of local democracy'; he is now chair of the New Local Government Network which seeks to influence debate about the future of local authority operations, structure and representation.



"I learnt to talk to practitioners early", he says, "and soon realised that listening attentively led not just to better research but opened up research opportunities." The more 'expert' the social researcher presents him or herself, the greater the tendency to be arrogant, making dissemination of findings all the harder: Professor Stoker says he sometimes hears from colleagues a phrase that sticks in his craw about how they 'find politicians stupid' – refusing to understand the position decision takers find themselves in, their room for manoeuvre and so the nature of the choices they make.

He models dissemination by analogy with a pebble dropping into water – the circles spread far from the original point of impact, through users, journalists and other intermediaries.

As for presentation skills, they probably 'come naturally', he says, though he has learned from older mentors during his career:

It is important, however, not to lose a strong sense of self-identity as an academic whose primary commitment is to 'delivering academic outputs' in the shape of refereed papers, monographs and seminars. That may occasionally mean being parsimonious with available time. "I have never fallen into the rent-a-quote trap." Despite being rung up 'on a daily basis' by journalists, he often says no 'to the point of rudeness'. He does not scruple to warn junior colleagues that their first priority must be to subject and department, not journalism.

His media experience began with commentary on local election programmes on Radio Leicester. He enjoyed it. But since, he has selected his media appearances very much 'on my own terms'. Media work is never to be taken too seriously. He notes differences in the media environment between Scotland and elsewhere in the UK. Serious coverage is better; he opines, mentioning Scotland's two national newspapers, *The Herald* and *The Scotsman*, both prepared to run 1,500-word articles on policy topics.

He thought hard before, first, joining the Commission for Local Democracy, which examined central local government relations, then the New Local Government Network. He concluded that a political scientist should take an opportunity to be on the margins of or actually inside the processes of government. He will, in five or so years' time, move back into a purely academic role 'enriched', and write something better as a result.

“ I would like people to concentrate less on the flashy technology stuff and more on trying to get extra people to vote in the first place. ”

The Independent





Conclusion

There are no cut-and-dried lessons from these accounts, but some themes do emerge.

The first is the need for awareness of, perhaps even sympathy for, the different time scales and language codes with which media and research operate. Another has to do with what Professor John Curtice called their different orders of significance. It may be possible, as Professor Lister said, to recycle material between the two but there can be no mistaking how different they are; Professor Stoker warns against blurring of identities. On the principle of devils and long spoons, engagement with the media demands a certain knowingness: that the researcher might be cast in a predefined role, that certain answers may be expected. There is nothing wrong in such expectations; the point is not to meet them ignorantly. Professor Quah believes that in the pressured modern academic life, dissemination itself needs to be planned: do it consciously, on a time budget as a deliberate part of the research life.

John Curtice is not the only one of the disseminators to counsel a certain humility in dealings with the media – not to assume the possessor of academic knowledge necessarily knows more or better. But the would-be disseminator also has to know a lot: Andrew Dilnot's motto is never talk in public unless you know the facts of the matter; John Kay's even stricter dictum is try not to talk unless you have something new to add.

Doing dissemination is, variously, cleansing, challenging, itself a source of intellectual stimulation. That's because simplifying an argument is a good test of its inner strength, because the translation of academic writing into layman's terms may expose rents and tears. How often in these interviews did the word 'succinct' recur – as a virtue.

Sir Peter Hall goes further and suggests there are few social scientists who would not benefit from a reporter's training, learning how to structure a 'story'. Professor Stoker generalises the point: talking to the public, especially to subjects of applied social research, can provide unique feedback about the quality of research – perhaps more than academic critique.

The media meanwhile do not offer researchers a stable structure. There are regional differences, notes Professor Stoker. The attractions of contributing to a programme such as BBC Radio Four's *Analysis* are greater than a sound-bite on a news show, says Professor Minford. Regular columns in newspapers (Professors Kay and Minford) offer special communication with readers.

It's not that there is, necessarily, a process of 'dumbing down' but Andrew Dilnot notes the absence even from the newsrooms of broadsheet newspapers of even basic reference books (leading their journalists sometimes to ask some dumb questions). Sir



Peter Hall notes how media agenda can change. Some subjects get cut out and good intentions about dissemination won't carry far if the media are indifferent to the subject matter:

All are agreed that communicating is a skilled business and it is worth being trained, however much temperament and personal predilection play their parts. For dissemination of social science does take personal qualities. There is John Curtice's 'toughness of skin' and Patrick Minford's willingness to endure brickbats from colleagues, perhaps also patience and understanding for colleagues unwilling to spend time and energy on dissemination because they are so oppressed by the need to compete academically, notably in assessment league tables. Andrew Dilnot prescribes availability and patience, plus a capacity to suffer fools gladly. Professor Stoker says researchers have to have the strength of mind to say no and focus on work to hand.

Perhaps dissemination also requires faith. It is the belief that there is a wide audience out there able to take part in debate who deserve the effort that needs to be made to communicate, and that politics and society would be enriched if there were wider sharing of social science results and theory. It may be a long-term task, for often, at best, social science will not have direct influence but rather inform the context within which civil servants and ministers form their ideas.

To thine own self be true is an old injunction but it is echoed here: in engaging with journalists and the media stick to what you can say with confidence, never say anything that would not pass muster with academic colleagues.



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