

Communicating Research as a Creative Endeavour: Reflections on the PECN Workshop

Many scholars want to share our findings with audiences outside of our academic communities, even as much of our time is invested in scholarly debates. As researchers, we devote countless working hours to designing robust connections between hypotheses, questions, methods, theory and findings to achieve often narrowly defined research objectives. This can leave little mental space to consider how our work can be useful to the real world. In December 2018, the Geographical Society of Ireland's Postgraduate and Early Career Network hosted a workshop to take time to consider how our scholarship can be beneficial to communities outside of the academy. The discussions pushed us to reflect on how we share our findings but also challenged us to think differently about our research, its potential, and its future.

Communicating research with impact is a creative endeavour. Publicly engaged scholarship requires imagining a world in which our research has made a change, no matter the scope or scale of that impact. Effective communication strategies often give purposeful attention to this vision, irrespective of the form it takes. Why are we trying to communicate our research? Discussions at the workshop underscored the importance of understanding one's broader goals. These goals work in tandem with determining what to communicate, to whom, with whom, and how.

Why are we communicating research? We heard many answers to this question. Do we want to affect policy change? Cause people to think differently about their environments? Change the public discourse? Offer care and solidarity in people's lives? There is not one model for impactful scholarship. Rory Hearne's keynote illustrated his work influencing housing policy and discourse. Jenna Christian reflected on her art as a practice of solidarity making with anti-racist activists. Rosie Howlett-Southgate showed photographs to evidence the care and witnessing central to her research practices. Achieving these ends – influence, solidarity, witnessing – requires attention to what we say and how we say it. For some speakers, translating a desire to make a change into message is one of the most difficult challenges. For others, finding the means to convey that a message or its audiences can be the stumbling block.

This is particularly the case in the black box of 'policy change'. Policymakers often operate in large bureaucracies. Figuring out who to communicate with and how can be challenging. Drawing from her experiences in the public sector, Irene Morris-Cadogan explained how making policy change is about relationship building and understanding the bureaucratic limitations faced by civil servants. She suggested getting to know policymakers through workshops, meetings, and regular informal conversations. These relationships can help identify the right people to receive your policy recommendations. They can also become relationships that help you craft recommendations that meet the bureaucratic realities policymakers face. Working with community groups can also facilitate policy change, as Mary Greene described of her activist work. When engaged in the research process, community groups can help position the findings and their meaning to local politicians. Examples of meaningful policy change often require building relationships and communities over extended periods and targeted messages to policymakers. Sometimes, however, it comes down to good timing. Being prepared for your research topic to suddenly become an important public policy issue can help you leverage those moments to get your message across.

In these moments where topics become an important public policy issue, they often become a point of public debate. Finding the right tools to affect public debate requires an astute understanding of how people share and debate ideas within your context. Mary Gilmartin and Cian O'Callaghan devoted attention to the medium of radio, a powerful communicative form in Ireland. Often characterized by short segments and soundbites, radio demands clear, concise and engaging language. Applying strategies that work with your medium is a lesson that extends to social media, newsprint, and television. The trick is to approach any communicative form with an understanding of how it communicates and its limitations, and then to craft your message appropriately.

Deciding on what medium can depend on who the 'public' is and how your work engages with them. Julian Bloomer and Jenna Christian spoke about their research practices working *with* communities. Many communities are invested in the research about their lives and environments. Under certain research contexts, they should be a part or central to crafting the messages that come out of the research and identifying the outlets to communicate those messages. Examples at the workshop also challenged us to think about how to take these practices to other academic activities. In teaching, Jenna Christian uses 'zines' to help students communicate their ideas about social justice issues. Making zines, mini-magazines filled with evocative text and images challenges students to think creatively and expressively about issues they care about. Inexpensive to make and easy to distribute at events, zines offer students a way to influence discourse and debate in their classes and campuses.

Communicating research can be as difficult as it is rewarding. At the workshop, enthusiasm for communicating research was not immune to the institutional barriers that such activities face. Even as more funding agencies reward outreach, many who employ publicly engaged scholarship still have to justify why it deserves to be institutionally recognized. Attendees discussed the challenges within their institutions and departments when these activities are undervalued compared to academic publications. While some expressed that these norms are shifting, for others, they remain institutional realities that will require continued collective efforts to change.

Despite these challenges, the workshop highlighted how the creativity required to communicate research with impact can enrich our research practices by bringing new questions, perspectives, and energy to our work. Building on the interest we saw at the workshop, we will continue these discussions at a panel on communicating research at the EUGEO conference in Galway in May and hope to see many of you there.