Making Research Matter

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Last thoughts

This chapter sums up the thinking in this book about the need for effort and creativity in presenting and promoting research to wider audiences. In this way, the researcher acts as film director making strategic choices about content, tone and appeal for particular audiences, working closely with others. Closing thoughts include the importance of researchers making strategic choices about who, what, how and when they can best reach target groups and networks. Time is needed to do this well, including effort to convey complex findings simply. Knowing who you want to reach and where these people go is an essential component of good engagement. Researchers are asked to bring their work to life with stories and their own enthusiasms and interests. There is a moral responsibility for researchers to do what they can to get their findings used, as the world needs high-quality and reliable research at a time of information saturation and uncertainty.

Give us the pitch

I was trying to think of an appropriate metaphor to tie together the messages of this book. The use of metaphors has been a bit of a thread in the scholarly literature to describe the knowledge-practice gap, from bridges (Kazdin 2008) to translation (Straus et al 2013) to bricolage (Kincheloe 2001), or the craft of improvising using diverse materials to make something new. Existing metaphors are sometimes criticised (Greenhalgh and Wieringa 2011) without putting forward a concrete alternative. We like metaphors, as we like stories.
The nearest metaphor I could come up with, thinking of all the insights from the people I talked to while writing this book, was the researcher as film director. That is, you take the raw script (your research findings) but need to first of all understand your audience. Who are you trying to reach – families, young adults or older women? What makes them laugh or cry? What other films have they liked? (But don’t be bound too much by what went before – who would have believed that a quirky arthouse foreign-language film about a destitute family of con artists in South Korea would be box-office gold?) How much do they know already about the context of your film, say Cold War communications, and how much do you need to tell them?

Your job then is to translate the script into a film which people will remember and enjoy. What mood do you want to create? How will you build this working with experts in lighting, cinematography, costumes and locations? What is the story arc and what is the tagline? This is the part below the title – great examples compress much of the emotion and storyline of a film into a single line, from *Double Indemnity*, ‘From the moment they met, it was murder’ to *Alien*, ‘In space, no one can hear you scream’. How would you market it and what would be in the trailer, in terms of critical moments or findings from your study? How will it add to the body of knowledge and can you describe its place in the tradition in which it sits – ‘like *Broadcast News* crossed with *His Girl Friday*’?

These are all strategic choices that you, the director, will make. But you will only bring it to life through collaboration with others. And it depends above all on your understanding and knowledge of the audience and what they want. (In fact, this metaphor does not completely work as it still assumes a passive audience rather than one which helps to shape and create a new form by working together).

**How to make your research matter**

Here is a recap of some of the important messages running through this book about finding ways to communicate better with a range of audiences.
Be sure your research is worth promoting

Not every research project needs active boosting and wider circulation. Some studies add usefully to a body of knowledge but in themselves do not justify active promotion. That might include some early development of a new approach, which needs further testing. Or a methodological study which may be valuable to other researchers without warranting broadsheet coverage. Given information overload, you need to understand the weight of your study and what space it should fill.

Having said that, most health and care researchers start their work because it addresses some important service gap or uncertainty. Something that perhaps has bothered them when they were practising as social workers or occupational therapists – how effective are family group conferences? What is ‘good enough’ in safeguarding decisions? What kinds of music therapy seem to work best for residents with dementia in care homes? Connecting back to the reasons for doing your research in the first place will help you to be a powerful advocate for the work.

In this book, I have used examples of health and care research which I think have made a difference. You will have your own personal portfolio of high-impact research in your field or area of practice. The first rule though in good engagement is understanding why the research is important and what makes it interesting and relevant to decision-makers. The best writing and communication cannot make up for a lack of passion and clarity about why the study matters in the first place. Articulating that is the first job in promoting your research.

Get to know the people you want to reach

Martin Marshall had a great turn of phrase when he asked that researchers come out of the ivory tower and engage with the ‘swampy lowlands’ of practice (Marshall 2014). This was in a piece arguing for more embedded forms of research, but there is a wider truth in the need for researchers to get out more and mix with people and communities they want to reach. In the present day, this could be done from the comfort of your own
desk in terms of social media. Develop a presence on Twitter or Facebook, follow interesting people of influence in your target communities and listen and engage in debate where your evidence might make a useful contribution. Listening is key. Attend meetings and conferences to learn more about the context and important issues to practitioners in the field. Ask a trusted source to guide you through the networks, communities and channels and spend time if you can getting to know their values and interests.

At this time of fiscal restraints and unprecedented demands on health and care services, you will be very mindful of adding to the burden for frontline staff and decision-makers. See if you can offer something in return, perhaps providing resources that could be used in social worker learning sets or running sessions for a hospital journal club.

Many researchers in the fields of health, social care and social work started out in practice or continue to span these worlds. This hybrid position can be difficult to maintain. In a parallel field, there is an interesting body of knowledge on the role of the clinical-manager and social identity issues, for instance in allied health professions (Petchey et al 2013). There is a risk of assuming knowledge while being at some remove from frontline staff. Keep in touch with what matters to the practitioners, managers and people you are trying to reach by reading what they read and following people they follow on social media. And don’t always go to the usual suspects – cast your net wide and think about the range of backgrounds and perspectives which might be relevant to your project or the populations you serve.

Engagement is the cornerstone of effective sharing of knowledge. It takes effort to build and maintain relationships with individuals and communities. But throughout this book, we have seen how researchers who invest time in meaningful engagement with the audiences they want to reach reap rewards. People share and create knowledge – every evidence journey is social.

**Remember, simple is not easy**

There are some good tips about writing simply and clearly from a number of people in this book. But it is difficult to do.
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Researchers often do not spend enough time on the public-facing outputs, like the plain language summary. This should not be an afterthought, tacked on at the end of the study. These need careful development and testing with people who know nothing about your research. You will need several versions before you have a clear line of argument for your research, which tells the story without compromising the science. A good rule of thumb is to read out loud and test headline messages again and again with different people, including those with no connection to your study.

Practise until you find your voice

You may not know your style, but you have one. There are certain words that you use, other people’s work that you cite more often, forms of writing that appeal to you. Different styles are appropriate for different audiences and purposes. But you will not be harming the integrity of your work by adding humour or making a surprise analogy with a topical issue or cultural icon. Your aim is to entertain, as well as inform. But to do this, you need to find a tone that feels authentic and true to yourself.

Be curious about the writers or thinkers you like. What appeals to you in their work? Do they have any qualities in common?

Start small with a short blog or newsletter feature and try to catch readers’ attention with an interesting fact or example from your work.

This book highlights certain products or outputs which are likely to be most appropriate for particular audiences. This includes feature articles or blogs in practice journals for health and social care staff; plain language summaries for general public and those using services; and policy briefs for decision-makers at national and local level. These all need different styles and formats. Writing in different ways – from opinion pieces to formal summaries – and taking part in different events – from local radio to neighbourhood meetings – is a skill like any other. It takes time to be fluent, conversational and strike the right tone. You can work with experienced practice journal editors and intermediaries like your university communications team or outfits like theconversation.com to get better at this. But the
main principle is to keep practising. It may take many drafts and iterations with others to create an output which is readable and relevant to your audience.

**Make it personal – bring the people back in**

A consistent thread running through this book has been the need to bring research to life with stories. This is what journalists do to connect the reader to the bigger issues at hand. You might want to use quotes or vignettes from your research or tell the story of why you did this research and its connection with you. You may have been motivated to carry out research on the hospital experience for people with learning disabilities when your autistic brother experienced poor care when having his appendix removed. You may want to start your presentation of your ethnographic study on migrants’ experience of childbirth with the story of a particular Somalian woman which stuck with you. On the whole, a good rule is to use stories, not theories, to advance understanding.

**Follow your curiosity**

Enthusiasm is infectious. It is a good idea to follow your own interests in promoting and sharing your work. This may go beyond your particular field or discipline. For instance, like many people I have long had a geeky interest in Bletchley Park and the work that went on there. I came across a brilliant book by an organisational historian, Christopher Grey, Professor of Organisation Studies at Royal Holloway, called *Decoding Organisation* (Grey 2012). I read the whole book like a novel. Using archives and oral history, he debunks many of the myths of the lone Turing genius in a Nissan hut to describe a complex organisation, with dynamic ‘tangle’ of cultures and knowledge work which combined industrial-scale data analysis with high-level judgement. In doing this, he also reviews and re-shapes current organisational theories.

At the time, I was organising a seminar for health service researchers on case studies. I invited Christopher Grey who gave a great talk, bringing new perspectives of historical ethnography
to our deliberations on organisational case studies in healthcare. He also of course had some killer stories from oral history work with codebreakers and analysts. My point is that I am glad I brought in a rather personal interest to my working life. Reflect on what and who interests and excites you beyond your particular study. What you bring will be particular to you, but may spark interest in others.

**Be assertive – the world needs good research**

I was struck by a point made in conversation with Teresa Chinn (Box 4.7), who set up a leading online nursing platform and community. She ended with a plea to researchers to do more to get their work known and not to think about this as self-promotion. From her perspective, there was too much information of dubious provenance and quality arriving in her inbox or Twitter feed. She needed to counter this with careful and robust evidence from trusted sources.

We live in an age of fake news. Not only is there much false information, but it is better at reaching people than information which is true. Researchers at MIT used different analytic methods to review ten years’ worth of Twitter data and concluded that ‘falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information’ (Vosoughi et al 2018).

What this means is that researchers have a responsibility to share good evidence. It is part of the role of the ‘engaged scholar’ (Van de Ven 2007) – the moral or civic duty for researchers to engage in public conversations and debate, on Twitter and through relevant community groups. This marks the convergence of trends, from open science, underlining the democratic rights to sharing research findings and data in a timely and accessible way, to longstanding debates on the role and responsibility of public and social intellectuals (Chapman and Greenhow 2019).

This responsibility includes reaching people with clear messages, while being true to the science. This means not overclaiming for single studies and presenting findings with attention to the weight and levels of certainty which the study design and findings allow. Incidents of actual deception in research are
rare. But we are collectively haunted by those cases we know about. This includes the social psychologist, Diedrik Stapel, found guilty of scientific fraud in studies of human attitudes and behaviour who stated: ‘I wanted to manipulate the truth and make the world just a little more beautiful than it is.’ There is a temptation for us all to smooth off the edges and simplify for effect. But there is a reasonable path between clarity and accuracy, which many researchers tread well.

Researchers start their work wanting to make a difference. The extra steps and actions set out in this book and elsewhere to reach and engage people in meaningful ways, paying attention to story, language and appropriate channels are part of the job of a researcher in the 21st century. Research findings should not stay in the library or on the university bookshelf. They should be translated and worked up with the right communities into new policies, decisions, conversations and practice. This is not a one-off event, but a social process with multiple interactions and exchanges. Understanding who you are trying to reach and the best ways to reach them is a core part of your mission. Practising different ways of communicating and testing these out with your target audience will strengthen your outputs. You are the best person to do this, working closely with others. Now you need to get your research out into the world.