EMBEDDING COMMUNICATIONS STAFF IN RESEARCH TEAMS TO INCREASE POLICY IMPACT

by Raymond J. Struyk and Louise Ball

This article reflects on the practicalities, benefits and challenges of embedding communications staff in research teams, based on the experience of four policy research organisations.

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About the series:

The OTT Best Practice Series compiles advice from collaborators with years of experience in the field. If you would like to contribute a piece, please send us an email: info@onthinktanks.org

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About the authors

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Introduction

Every policy research organisation (PRO) leader knows the frustration of being unable to get talented researchers to draw out policy implications. In last year's OTT Annual Review, two articles expressed versions of this frustration over researcher disinterest in policy processes[1].

Certainly, there are researchers who thrive on participating in the policy development process – such as getting media attention with a well-written statement, actively engaging in policy debate or in strategy development. One of the authors of this article has written about these 'policy entrepreneurs' elsewhere[2].

But the reality is that many of our research colleagues find technical analysis and discussion much more compelling and satisfying. They also value the recognition they get from peers after publishing in highly rated journals. Additionally, for some academic or university-based analysts working with think tanks on a non-resident basis, there is severe pressure to publish in respected journals as a condition of achieving promotions. In short, the incentives are still largely for analysts to publish in academic journals, rather than demonstrate policy impact.

At the same time, in a new book on think tank industry developments, Donald Abelson[3] and Christopher Rastrick[4] each observes that US think tanks have largely become advocacy tanks. Over time relatively fewer of the available resources are going to in-depth research and more to comprehensive media and other campaigns to advance their findings with decisionmakers.

While the shift to advocacy may be less in other countries, the goal of informing and influencing policy through rigorous analysis and effective communication is universal to PROs. This is what differentiates them from more academic research organisations. In this context, communicating research findings in a credible, compelling and accessible way is critical.

An open question, therefore, is how to entice analysts (with their time constraints and a clear preference for technical writing) to contribute more actively to public policy? And the broader issue perhaps is how best can PROs develop and implement effective strategic communications plans that complement rigorous research efforts to achieve policy impact?

Today, most PROs have some degree of in-house communications support. Typically, this is a centralised team. However, in some organisations communications staff are also embedded within research teams. This embedded model is what we will explore in this article.

As with previous articles in the OTT Best Practices Series, we explore this issue by drawing on actual practices of PROs to see what we can learn. The four organisations we spoke to this time are:

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1 Obino, F. 'Can Covid-19 flip North–South power imbalances in research,' OTT Annual Review 2020-2021. On Think Tanks | Ott annual review 2020–2021: Think tanks and change . p.17.
Gutbrod, H. 'Think tanks, change, and bright spots': On Think Tanks | Ott annual review 2020–2021: Think tanks and change. p. 30. 2 Struyk, R. 'Greater Policy Impact: Stronger Post-Project Engagement.' On Think Tanks, November 2018.
3 Abelson, D. 'The Rise or Demise of American Think Tanks?' in Abelson, D.E., and C.J. Rastrick. 2021.
4 Rastrick, C. '"Atlantic Drift": A Baseline Model for American and Supranational Think Tanks,' in Abelson, D.E., and C Rastrick. 2021 Handbook on Think Tanks in Policy. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, pp.278–310.

- Urban Institute: A 54-year-old think tank with a staff nearing 600 located in Washington, DC. It is focused substantially on social policy issues and was created as part of the United States government's response to violent urban demonstrations in the 1960s. It became a fully independent private entity in 1978.

- NORC at the University of Chicago: An 80-year-old think tank with about 800 staff. It has conducted ground-breaking studies, created and applied innovative methods and tools, and advanced principles of scientific integrity and collaboration. NORC has a large policy research programme in transitional and developing countries.

- Results for Development (R4D): A 14-year-old international non-profit organisation with think tank roots. It has offices and experts around the world that work on policy and systems strengthening in low- and middle-income countries. It takes the long view of successful development and collaborates with country 'change agents' – government officials, civil society leaders, and private sector innovators – to support translation of knowledge into practice and developing relevant new knowledge. Its premise is that local leadership is central to self-sustaining change. Though not technically a think tank, R4D is included among the sample because of its innovative approaches and similar organisational considerations. [5]

- ODI: A 60-year-old independent global think tank with more than 220 staff. ODI's research, convening and influencing work focuses on several overarching global challenges and priorities, including global cooperation, human rights, conflict and peace, climate, environment and biodiversity crisis, digitalisation, and global economic order. [6]

Louise Ball worked as a communications specialist within one of ODI's research programmes for four years (2014–2018). Raymond Struyk was employed at the Urban Institute and NORC for many years as an analyst and later consulted with R4D for six years.

In the article, we refer to these organisations – a mix of think tanks and civil society organisations that take an evidence-based approach to their advocacy – as policy research organisations (PROs). We do not ascribe any policy or practice to a specific organisation by name, consistent with our confidentiality pledge to them. However, to be able to link different actions to a specific organisation, we have assigned each of them a label: PRO1, PRO2, PRO3 and PRO4. The numbering does not correspond to the order in which the PROs are listed above.

Each PRO uses different terms to refer to internal structures and staff members. For confidentiality and consistency, we will refer to what different organisations may call research 'programmes', 'centres', 'units', 'groups' etc. as 'research teams' and the heads of those teams as 'research directors'. We will refer to what different organisations may call 'communications', 'public affairs' or 'policy engagement' teams as 'communications teams' and the heads of those teams as 'communications directors'.

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5 For a statement of R4D's principles see: http://r4d.org/about/our-principles/?_ga=2.168268713.987849210.1606301519-237446072.1602841814

6 The authors thank Greg Lanier, Missy Nachbar, Heather Luca, Gian Lagomarisno, David Watson, Bridget Lowell and Elizabeth Forney for the information they provided about their organisations and insights into the whole embedding phenomena.

Findings

Motivations for embedding communications staff in research teams

For most of the PROs we spoke to, communications staff were first embedded in research teams around 10 years ago.

For PRO2, the decision to embed communications staff within research teams was initiated by a new communications director who wanted 'to do a better job at advancing the organisation's policy research findings', and to achieve greater consistency in communications across research teams spanning multiple countries. Whereas, for PRO3 the decision was highly pragmatic: a new project had its own website and was generating a lot of outputs that would require at least one full-time dedicated communications person.

In PRO1, the genesis of embedded communications staff is unknown; when the former communications director joined the organisation in 2015, communications staff were already well embedded in research teams. In 2016, the then communications director began a process of integrating embedded communications staff into one team. At first, communications staff worked across several research teams and then in 2019, centralisation was enacted with the creation of one single, integrated communications team.

Interestingly, today, PRO1 has come full circle and is in the process of re-embedding communications staff within the research teams. The decisions to withdraw and then to re-embed communications staff was driven by the respective communication directors' desire to improve strategic communications across the organisation.

Three of the four PROs have retained their embedded structure over several years, and the fact that PRO1 has returned to an embedded model after trialling reintegration into a centralised team suggests that there is merit to this approach.

However, none of the organisations has communications staff embedded within all research teams. Some programmes or senior management may feel they are simply too small to warrant a full-time embedded communications specialist. Meanwhile, more generally, it appears that while there are many benefits to embedding communications staff within research teams, there are challenges.

How it works in practice

Central communications teams

All four PROs have a central communications team that manages organisation-wide communications – such as the website, newsletter, social media, and staff meetings. The central communications team sets the branding and standards for the organisation's communications and also provides additional support to research teams without communications embeds.

For PRO1, when the organisation reintegrated embedded communications staff into one centralised team, all publications and digital communications were managed centrally by specialised communications staff. There were then designated thematic leads who 'docked into' research teams to provide strategic communications and engagement support.

Where staff physically sit within the office seems to play an important role in how they relate to research and communications teams. Across all our PROs embedded communications staff sit within the research teams and attend project meetings so they understand the analyses and basis for policy recommendations. As described further below, research directors employ embeds with particular skills and in quite different roles.

Despite embeds being part of the research teams, communications directors across the organisations spoke about the importance of maintaining a sense of a cross-organisational communications team. The main concern was that embedded communications staff can get too focused on their individual project and forget that they are contributing to wider organisational impact. Knowledge sharing and professional development among communications colleagues were also mentioned as an important factor for maintaining a sense of cohesion among communications staff. This was mainly achieved through regular (usually monthly) all-communications-staff meetings.

Funding

Funding plays a big role in whether or not a research team has embedded communications support. Funding levels and sources often differ between a PRO's research teams. For example, a team may have a large integrated grant, or win a big multi-year project that enables them to fund designated communications staff.

At PRO3, when the central communications team members provide research teams support, their time is also charged to the research or project team's budget. In some cases, a research team or project may be able to fund 30–50% of a communication's staff member's time, and the central communications team may deploy someone to provide dedicated support for a three-month period. The communications specialist is not fully embedded in the research team (is unlikely to attend all meetings or sit with the research team) but they do build technical knowledge and trust with the team. You could call this a 'quasi-embed' model.

PRO1 mentioned that some research teams saw the value in communications and were good at building communications staff time into all project budgets and therefore could afford more support. But not all teams see the value in this.

When PRO1 took the decision to reintegrate embedded communications staff into one central team, the intention was for research teams to continue to fund posts. But this didn't happen. Consequentially, funding was one of the contributing factors that led to the decision to re-embed communications staff within research teams.

Recruitment

Across the PROs, embedded communications staff are typically recruited externally, with specific job descriptions to meet the research team or project's needs. In addition to requiring communications expertise, they often request subject area/thematic knowledge or experience.

Most of the embedded staff are 'communications generalists' but occasionally posts are recruited for with specialised communications skills – such as digital communications, editing or publication production.

Generally, research directors are satisfied with the work of their communications team members. Perhaps this is not surprising as they were nearly always very involved in the recruitment process.

Line management/reporting

There is a range of supervision models for embeds among the sample organisations. In most, the embedded communications staff report directly to the research director. Performance is either rated by the communications director with input from the research director, or by the research director with input from the communications director.

Perceived benefits and challenges of embedding communications staff

Challenges

A couple of communications directors mentioned that embedded communications staff may feel more affinity to their research team or project – especially if it has its own branding and website – and lose interest in the organisation's overall mission and communications efforts. As one communications director put it, they lose sight of the fact that the project is contributing the organisation's overall impact.

When communications staff are managed by research directors, there is a risk that they may become – as one communications director put it – 'publication machines'. For many researchers, communications equate to publications. Thus, they lose sight of the far more important strategic communications work that is necessary to achieve meaningful policy impact.

One organisation noted that when communications staff are embedded within research teams and managed by research directors, one risk is that they can sometimes be undermined and undervalued. They can also become a tool for broader organisational power struggles – for example, which research team has the loudest public 'voice' or brand recognition.

Benefits

The biggest benefit to an embedded approach seems to be that it enables communications staff to build subject knowledge relationships and trust with their research colleagues. This takes time and is difficult to achieve without the communications staff member being embedded within the research team. Researchers may distrust communications staff, sometimes assuming that they will 'dumb down', not fully understand, or misrepresent their findings. If communications and research staff are going to work together to deliver meaningful strategic communications that support research efforts, good relationships and subject knowledge are essential. This was the single biggest reason for PRO1 deciding to re-embed communications staff within research teams after trialling the reintegration of one centralised team.

At the same time, there is a strong efficiency argument for centralising some activities that different programmes can rely upon, such as web support, social media, and outreach to traditional media.

Reflections

This article is co-authored by a researcher and a communications specialist, and as such we bring different perspectives to the topic. Struyk was surprised to learn that communications embeds are not an oddity among PROs. Also unexpected was that their presence dates back further than the last five years. Ball – having been a PRO communications embed over seven years ago – was less surprised.

While we only spoke to a small number of organisations and we have no estimates of the frequency of this arrangement, it seems non-trivial at least among larger organisations. In researching organisations to speak to for this article, we came across other examples of organisations with embeds too – like the Pew Foundation in the US that has a communications specialist embedded in each of its teams.

An issue to watch: when research teams have embedded communications staff, they become more self-sufficient and can start to see themselves as an independent entity. This can generate a tension between the research teams and the organisation's leadership and central communications team. Significant friction could easily undermine the development and execution of strong strategic communications and ultimately the organisation's policy impact. Self-orientated teams may also not be taking advantage of supplemental help available from the central team.

Maintaining a sense of a cross-organisational communications team seems to be particularly important for professional development of communications staff, standardising approaches, introducing new tools, sharing best practice and learning. Missing this training makes the embeds steadily less valuable to the PRO at large. Thus, communications and research directors should work together to make sure that communications staff understand the importance of – and have the capacity for – attending meetings and training sessions.

PRO1's story presents a particularly interesting case for reflection. The decision to centralise was an attempt to reprioritise the organisation's communications to be more strategic – to focus on how research and analysis can contribute to policy impact, rather than focusing on publications as the end goal. It was also an attempt to create more unity within the communications team – to offer clearer leadership, career development opportunities, and to build respect for the professional expertise of communications staff. Ultimately, this decision was reversed and communications staff were re-embedded because research programmes were reticent to cover what they perceived as 'central' costs, which contrasted with the willingness of most to cover the cost of their own embedded programme communications staff.

Thus, it would seem that there is no perfect model. While PROs, by definition, seek to inform policy decisions and processes, the bigger challenge is that in practice PROs and research teams are still often not fully committed to ways of working that support meaningful policy engagement. PRO3 reminded us that sometimes this is about packaging evidence in different ways to make it accessible to policy audiences. And sometimes it about facilitating inclusive dialogue or designing a pilot intervention.

All our PROs seem to agree that the embedded communications model has many benefits: from the practical ability to meet a research project or team's communications needs to enabling research and communications staff to build the mutual trust and understanding of each other's work that ultimately is required for effective strategic communications to support policy impact. The trick is to find the right balance between embedding and centralising.

Funding (or lack thereof) is often cited as the reason for (not) being able to finance dedicated communications staff. Research directors including a request for funding for their embeds therefore is a clear indicator that they believe they are getting value for money from them. Smaller organisations can consider different communications staffing plans that include embeds to a limited extent. There may be one major, multi-year project that envisions the equivalent of a full-time communications person. PRO3 has embeds only for three such projects while the bulk of the overall communications work is done by those working in the central office. In sum, this is a staffing arrangement that can be creatively adopted by comparatively smaller PROs as opportunities present themselves.

Even though embeds have been part of the PRO scene for a decade, it may still be news to many in the PRO community. We would welcome learning about the experiences that you have had over the years and look forward to hearing from you.

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