

*Research Communication at the Crossroads of Cultural Flows:
Perspectives From Practice*

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The Barcelona Conference on Arts, Media & Culture 2024
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Research Communications is an integral component of Research practice, enabling the amplification of societal impact. The epistemic frameworks of this practice have been long set and provide useful guidelines, often set in the language of ‘best practices.’ An important layer in understanding research communication is to also reflect on inherent tensions that emerge in the flows of communication. This is especially pertinent as research itself - particularly international and comparative research, now finds its space in multiple intersections. In this paper, we draw on the idea of “Cultural Flows” to highlight how Research and practice of communicating research flows across multiple geographic and disciplinary divisions, and cultural contexts, implicating institutions as well as researchers. We reflect on the agential opportunities and the structural challenges faced by institutions and individuals while defining effective impact-led interventions. We draw on frameworks provided by critical cultural studies, and our own practice of having worked in interdisciplinary global research projects and focus on three key aspects - the evolving Media landscape in the Global North and South; the various cultural frameworks and structures in which the process of communication unfolds in these geographies; and the structural challenges in defining impact strategies. We argue that Research Communication frameworks and by extension impact-led interventions, differ across both geographies and disciplines. Facets such as digital penetration, access, language, medium, as well as the current political climate play a key role in how effective communication practices and allied strategies emerge, allowing for newer ways of thinking about impact.

Keywords: Research Communications, Cultural Flows, Interdisciplinary, Urban, Global South, Impact, Communication Practices

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Introduction

Research communication has a long and storied history, aligning with the very act of knowledge production. The dissemination of research in its varied forms is integral to the practice of research, and in recent years has become essential to research design itself. In the social sciences broadly, and in particular development studies, the role of research communications is especially crucial as it is tasked with dissemination that has impact and fosters change.

Cities particularly in the Global South are undergoing rapid urbanization that brings opportunities as well as the challenges of inequality, extreme deprivation and environmental degradation. A significant amount of new research is located at these sites that calls for newer ways of situating urban futures. A growing academic subdiscipline looks at theorising and predicting the shape of the future city (Moir et al., 2014). Building on this subdiscipline, Keith et al, call for a ‘new urban science’ that addresses the potential of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary scholarship to build capacities of cities to tackle the increasingly complex challenges associated with urbanisation (Keith et al., 2020) This paper draws on the authors’ experience of having been part of Communication teams of two global interdisciplinary projects, to propose an investigation of Research Communications as practice and suggest ways of a deeper understanding of a grounded and reflexive practice.

The paper is laid out in the following manner. First, it lays out the background of this research, highlighting particularly on the idea of interdisciplinary and internationalization of research. Second, it talks about the concept of flows and their relevance to Research Communications. Third, the authors reflect on their practice, highlighting the approach, and the structural challenges that they face as Research Communicators. The paper concludes by situating the practice of Research Communications within the contested spaces of these flows and discuss our way forward.

To begin with, the paper looks at two important phenomena in research practice that inform this investigation - the idea of interdisciplinarity, and the internationalization of research.

Interdisciplinarity: Interdisciplinarity is a much-contested term, even though the calls to engage in it have been persistent over the past few decades. Part of the challenge has been in defining it. Jacobs and Frickel (2009), in their critical assessment, provide a useful roadmap that helps in thinking through the term. Interdisciplinarity, while acknowledged as an important step in the process of knowledge production, is beset by rooted disciplinary and institutional challenges. As Jacobs and Frickel suggest, “Whether basic or applied, interdisciplinarity is supposed to integrate knowledge and solve problems that individual disciplines cannot solve alone.” Yet there are existing barriers embedded in established structure that hinder this promise. These include epistemic barriers like incompatible styles of thought, differing methods and methodologies, legacy research traditions, techniques and language that make it difficult to translate across disciplinary domains. Added to this are factors like specialized journals, conferences and departments, and institutional administrative barriers (Jacobs & Frickel, 2009). Given the prevalence of and continued call for interdisciplinary work, research communications for social impact and change then finds itself with added brief of being in service of multiple categories of stakeholders including but not limited to lay audiences, policy makers, and other researchers, who were hitherto relegated to their own disciplinary silos.

International research: Research itself has expanded beyond the confines of geographic boundaries. International work, from being confined to disciplines like Anthropology, is now the remit of almost all knowledge areas – particularly in the social and developmental domains. With this comes a series of opportunities and challenges including the conversations on the tensions between local and global, the relevance of methods and methodologies, research on who's dime and for whose benefit. Further, the unequal development of research ecosystems in various geographies lead to differing imperatives for research. As Sami (Sami, 2023) suggests, drawing on the experiences of international research funding flows, there are implications on research structure, output production, researcher time and added precarity of practice. In such a scenario, it is important to look at the role and understand the possibilities of research communications.

Understanding Flows

Research Communications as a practice therefore finds itself in tensions between, and negotiated spaces of, local and global, and the need for heterodox disciplinary approaches. A central imperative here then is to think about the practice informed by 'Flows.' Rockefeller (2011) details the multiple genealogies of the term highlighting the contributions of Arjun Appadurai (along with Carol Breckenridge), Ulf Hannerz and Manuel Castells.

Arjun Appadurai's seminal work on flows and scapes provides a theoretical frame that can help navigate this practice. His article 'Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy' (1990) presents a theoretical exploration of the dynamics of cultural globalisation in the late twentieth century. He proposes a new framework based on the idea of 'scapes,' which are fluid, irregular, and contextual flows of cultural elements across national and regional boundaries. In his articulation the space of the flows is a series of scapes that he called "ethnoscapes," "mediascapes," "technoscapes," "financescapes," and "ideoscapes." In this paper, authors argue that the complexity of communicating research informs and is informed by these scapes encompassing different flows – of researchers, research, funding, embedded ideas and ideologies, the technical tools available. A key concept introduced by Appadurai is that of 'deterritorialization' – in essence the increasingly ephemeral nature of boundaries in a globalized world.

Manuel Castells in the *Informational City* (1989) situates the 'spaces of flows,' created by the then newly evolving information technology paradigms, characterised by global interconnections, against the traditional spaces of experiences – the 'space of places' (cited in Rockefeller, 2011). Similar to Appadurai's articulation, the 'space of flows' is unbounded, and made possible by a network of connections. However, in articulating the 'spaces of places', Castells also recognizes the rootedness of experiences, even though they are both generally in opposition with inherent logics of power.

Ulf Hannerz's work is important here to note as it moves the conversation on 'spaces' and 'flows,' from the oppositional to a collaborative negotiation. He argues that we move into a space of 'global ecumene,' where transnational cultural flows are bridging and transforming cultures that were once less intensively connected (cited in Rockefeller, 2011). An important point here is the question of scale. Hannerz's work, while looking at flows, recognized the importance of scale, therefore moving beyond the traditional 'small scale' to encompass regions, cities, networks and international connectedness (Rockefeller, 2011).

The paper tries to situate the role of the research communications at a particularly challenging crossroad, that is informed by the increasing interdisciplinarity and challenges of internationalizing research practice. At this moment of inquiry, frameworks on flows, drawing on the work of Appadurai, Castells and Hannerz, help make abstract sense of the authors' emergent practice. In the sections that follow, the authors establish the context of their work, provide examples from their reflexive practice drawing on two major international research projects, and provide ways forward for both practice and inquiry. Coming from an institution situated in the Global South, working on international projects with a team with cross sectoral and cross thematic expertise on the projects, across different age groups, provided a way to think through some of the challenges with research communications across different scales - Individual, Project and the Institution.

Reflections From Practice

The authors were part of the Management and Communications team of the two global, collaborative, interdisciplinary projects - PEAK Urban and KNOW.

The PEAK Urban project (Prediction and projection, Emergent urbanisms, Adopted knowledge, Knowledge exchange) brought together institutions from geographies in the Global North and Global South namely, University of Oxford (UK), Peking University (China), African Centre for Cities (South Africa), Eafit University (Colombia), and Indian Institute for Human Settlements (India). The project was grounded in the concept of 'interdisciplinarity,' maintaining that interdisciplinary studies are the way to understand challenges of urbanisation in the 21st century.

The Knowledge in Action for Urban Equality (KNOW) project investigated urban planning education in the Global South and its role in addressing inequality. The team was divided across 6 work packages and 12 cities across Asia, Africa and Latin America. IIHS co-led Work Package 5 with the Development Planning Unit (DPU), University College London (UCL).

Communications for both these projects was decentralized but planned collectively. There was a central Communications team anchored within the Lead University, supported by teams within individual institutions.

Communications Approach

In these projects, the approach to achieving the Pathways to Impact was to focus on key stakeholders involved in knowledge production on the central issues of the projects. These were categorized across three key aspects: Project; Individual/Researcher; and the Institution. The table below indicates the different mediums of communications that were used, and the scales at which they were used.

Table 1: Mediums and Scales of Communications Used for Publicity

| Channels | Sub-category | Individual | Project | Institution |
|-------------------|------------------|------------|---------|-------------|
| Website | | X | X | X |
| Newsletters | Project | X | X | |
| | Institutional | X | X | X |
| Researcher Videos | | X | X | |
| Social Media | Twitter | X | X | X |
| | Instagram | | X | X |
| | YouTube | X | X | X |
| Publications | Journal papers | X | X | X |
| | Essays and blogs | X | X | |
| | Impact Briefs | | X | X |
| | Country Reports | | X | X |
| | Global Reports | | X | X |
| MOOC | | | X | X |
| Seminar Series | | X | X | |
| Working Groups | | X | X | X |
| Conferences | | X | X | X |

These ranged from social media, mailers, newsletters, to a MOOC – Massive Online Open Course – that was developed based on the research that emerged from the project. All these mediums eventually fed into the publicity at the three scales, but some to a more degree than the other. For example, the website was a tool to showcase the individuals, projects and the institutions; but the researcher videos focussed on the individual and the project. For publications, one had to think about the specific audiences. In addition, project retreats were hosted in different institutions bringing together younger and newer scholars, encouraging collaborative research. An online seminar series to share work in progress research was initiated, particularly during COVID that hampered travel between institutions.

At IIHS, specific campaigns were designed that would talk to different scales focussing on the individual, project and institution, that included a combination of media channels. It is critical to note here that large, global, interdisciplinary projects mean that communication is taking place at different scales, with multiple campaigns running simultaneously. For example, while there was a larger mandate towards the Project, each institution also had a mandate to publicise projects and people within their own institution.

Research on the PEAK project within IIHS covered 6 thematics focussing on Governance, Health, Energy, Deindustrialisation, Land and Spatial Inequalities and Water. Research emerging from these streams not only fed into the larger goal of promoting the project, but also provided institutional visibility to IIHS. A key event curated to showcase the PEAK research at IIHS, was ‘Nakshe Kathe,’ an exhibition that brought together research on Bangalore. The exhibition used Maps, Audio Visual and text to demonstrate Bangalore’s urban transition over the years. Emerging research was also shared in the IIHS newsletters, through specific social media campaigns around publications, and presented at conferences.

The team used existing structures that were in place at the institutional level - newsletter, videos, support from specific Labs; but also tapped into newer spaces that led to the emergence of new kinds of knowledge and ways of communication such as the exhibition, and MOOC called 'Shaping Urban Futures,' that is available on Coursera.

Case Studies

Using two examples of output, the authors illustrate the ways in which the complexities of flows and the challenges of heterodox, cross national approaches played out - The website and the policy briefs. The website was meant to showcase the overall project and became a portal both for international as well as local regional audiences. The imperative, as partners in this project, was to balance the needs of the local audiences with the needs of the project to be visible internationally. What this meant was that messaging and strategies were crafted at all three scales (individual, project and institution), to showcase both the diversity of researchers from various disciplines that came together, as well as snippets of work that were region specific. The website as a mode of communication had to hold together messaging that informed local as well as cross boundary issues.

The policy briefs, which were a central component of the multiple research outputs, on the other hand had to be unidirectional in one sense - that is, to inform local issues and provide pathways to impact, emerging from research done locally. The research communications team had to translate complex research in easily understandable terms keeping in mind the audiences referred to, which in this case was imagined to be policy makers.

Challenges of Thinking Through Impact

Impact strategies require careful choice of mediums, considering access, language, and digital reach. In the last couple of decades, the media landscape has changed globally with an increased dependence on social media for communication. There is competition from communicators and content creators across different spaces, thematic and genres. Engagement, click rates, followers are seen as ways through which impact is measured. In India, the internet penetration rates stand at 52%, which means half of the country is yet to receive digital access. When you design a campaign here, social media, despite its relevance, cannot be the only medium of communication in such cases.

The socio-economic and political landscape also plays a critical role in shaping communication effectiveness. The Policy Briefs for the PEAK projects were seen as key instruments to drive and support policy interventions within each country where the partner institution was located. However, much of this depends on the political climate in which each country operates, particularly the network or the leverage that an individual or a collective would have with the agencies in that city/country.

Communication strategies also need to consider the language barriers or needs in communicating research as these barriers impede the broad understanding of research. PEAK Partners at EAFIT and Peking University published significant material in Spanish and Mandarin that meant translating content into English to make it accessible to all.

Research Communications is often seen as the final step of the research process and not as an integral component of the actual process of conducting research. More importantly, at an individual level, personal preferences of media usage, particularly the choices and

preferences of social media platforms, the willingness to disseminate your research as well as engage with other research plays a significant role in easing the Communication process.

Conclusion

As illustrated through the examples, the multidirectional and unidirectional intent of the two outputs - Website and policy briefs - illustrate the ways in which Research Communications practice considers the heterodox interdisciplinarity and the flows in which they propagate.

Creating an impact-driven strategy, requires the dismantling of the communications needs of individuals, projects, and institutions, and delivering on a reflexive practice that considers not only the fragmented nature of media but the multiplicity of needs that are embedded into it. It also requires a deep understanding of the socio-economic-cultural and the political landscape in which the research operates. Doing so allows for a practice that can translate complex research, as well as enable transformative and just paths to change.

The paper concludes by reiterating the central logic, that the role of research communications tends to be looked at as one that delivers impacts on the needs of the project and therefore in some senses is outwards facing. However, a deeper and self-reflexive practice can be imagined if one were to critically examine the positionalities of the different stakeholders connected to practice of knowledge production. The stakeholders operating at the scales of individual, project and institution, in global research practice, find themselves at the crossroads of interdisciplinarity and internationalization of research, and therefore are impacted by relevant flows. This work aims to further the understanding of this intersection.

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