

## *The Evolving Face of Research Communication: Case of DECCMA*

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### **Abstract**

Communication of research outputs is no longer limited to publication of journal papers. With our changing times and demands, the modes of communication are also changing. Besides scoring high on impact factors in the academic world, research communication now also aims to score big in terms of impact in the non-academic world. Informal outputs such as blogs, animations, videos, etc. are also encouraged by funders to be produced from a research project for optimization of outreach. While these forms are evolving, it is worthwhile considering how research teams can be enabled to produce such outputs for effective 'Research into Use'. When research is put to use through effective communication of research, we can prepare ourselves for "Fearful Futures" riddled with issues of climate change, resource scarcity and need for sustainability. Based on empirical evidences from "Deltas, vulnerability & Climate Change: Migration & Adaptation (DECCMA)" project, this paper shall examine the benefits of such evolution of research communication and the ways in which the team has worked to produce informal outputs.

Keywords: Research Communication, Informal Outputs, Research into Use, Climate Change

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## **Introduction**

Research projects have adapted to changing times in terms of communication. Communications within the project as well as communication of research findings have undergone changes owing to a changing world. Technology has revolutionized the way on which projects function across time zones through the aid of emails, video conference calls, sharing project updates through online newsletters, and fulfill the monitoring and evaluation requirements through filling up of online forms. Production of research outputs have also benefitted from the boon of technology and the internet. Besides the traditional outputs such as journal papers, posters and conference presentations, projects now have the advantage of sharing research results through blogs, online articles, videos, photo-stories, infographics and policy briefs. Publishing traditional outputs have served the purpose of sharing research results, stirring new academic debates, debunking myths, grounding new theories and hypotheses. Besides these purposes, journal papers also add laurels to the experiences of the researchers and their moments of pride vary with the impact factors of journals. To achieve impact in the non-academic world, these traditional outputs are aided by the new outputs. While the target audience for traditional outputs is mostly the academia, non-traditional outputs are tailored for the non-academic world as well. This may bring forth the question as to why research outputs should be tailored for the non-academic world. This is where the concept of Research into Use surfaces, which in very simple terms means ensuring that research results are put to use for achieving impact. This impact is created when policy makers, practitioners, media, and the common people implement the research results to make positive changes in the world.

## **Traditional Outputs and New Outputs**

To examine how these new outputs fare against the traditional outputs, this paper shall examine data and evidences from the “DEltas, vulnerability & Climate Change: Migration & Adaptation (DECCMA)” project. The DECCMA website ([www.deccma.com](http://www.deccma.com)) houses all resources, both traditional and new outputs, produced by the project. Based on all-time views of website data for these two categories of outputs and the total number of outputs produced till the end of September 2018, the average views were calculated for each. This shows that new outputs have two times more average views than the traditional outputs (Figure 1)



**Figure 1 Average website views for traditional and new outputs**

To understand the depth of this popularity of new outputs, website data was further delved into to identify the medium facilitating these views. Twitter emerged as the topmost social medium which acted as a referrer to the website. DECCMA has a primary Twitter account, every member lead country (Bangladesh, Ghana, and India) have accounts, and several project and program members actively use Twitter to share project news. For this study, Twitter Analytics data from DECCMA’s primary Twitter account (@decma) have been used to investigate if tweets have a role to play in promoting views for outputs. From that data it emerges that tweets relating to outputs have higher URL clicks and engagement. Based on URL clicks, top two tweets are of an infographic and a video sharing our project results and experiences, and based on engagement, the topmost tweet is of a policy brief. Additionally, based on URL clicks, six out of the top ten tweets relate to new outputs, namely one infographic, one video, two policy briefs, one photo-story and one blog.

Website data showing overall views for the website and Twitter data were also examined to understand if website views were promoted when outputs are tweeted about. Based on the website’s monthly views from September 2017, when our new website went live, to September 2018, it is observed that the month of July 2018 has the maximum website views (Table 1). Referring to Twitter data, it is interesting to observe that amidst tweeting about other project updates, there were four tweets announcing five outputs from the project. Out of these five outputs, one was about publication of a journal paper and the remaining four were about new outputs. Amongst these new outputs, there was one infographic with the most URL clicks and featured among top 10 most engaging tweets, and one photo-story and two policy briefs featuring in the top ten most URL clicks for tweets. With these evidences it can thus be established that these new outputs are more popular.

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
<b>2017</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	824	1052	1175	765
<b>2018</b>	932	968	897	1032	1049	869	<b>1368</b>	1108	1054			

**Table 1 Monthly website views**

### **Enabling Research Teams to Produce New Outputs**

Having established the popularity of new outputs, now it can be explored as to how research teams can be enabled to produce these new outputs. From our experiences in DECCMA, we learnt that the key to producing any of these new outputs is to simplify, tailor and personalize. Simplifying the complex research messages by stripping it of any jargon is the first step. The second step is to tailor those messages according to the target audience and the medium. The type of new output will determine the mode of tailoring the message and the target audience. Lastly, the communication of findings can be personalized with voices sharing experiences which tell a story. While these steps can help in shaping the new outputs, research teams can be enabled by following these steps –

- Instilling the importance of new outputs – The importance and effectiveness of these new outputs should be shared with the researchers. Researchers are better trained and naturally more inclined to producing traditional outputs over these new outputs. These can be shared through evidences showing the wide acceptance and utility of new outputs.
- Encouraging production of new outputs – After the importance and effectiveness of these new outputs are established to the researchers, they need to be trained and encouraged to produce these outputs besides the traditional ones. Training workshops can be organized for blog-writing, photo-story production, infographic creation, story-telling of field experiences through videos etc.
- Engaging Research-into-Use (RiU) personnel –It is somewhat unfair to expect all researchers to produce both traditional and new outputs because these have different skill set requirements. Just like one cannot expect all writers to excel in all genres of literature, it is unfair to expect the same of researchers. This gap can be filled by RiU personnel who are not only focused and trained to communicate research findings across media and audience but can also guide research teams to maximize outreach of outputs.

### **Fearful Futures**

Hailing from a climate change research project with a focus on migration, a changing world in the future has always been our concern and “Fearful Futures” being the conference theme of The Asian Conference on Media, Communication & Film 2018 has prompted thoughts in the lines of a changing world amidst increasing vulnerabilities. The fearful futures which are relevant for the project and for this study include climate change negatively impacting lives and livelihoods of millions of people around the world and migrant crises continuing globally. While these are the more obvious fearful futures which we could think of, there are other two instances

which are fearful. Despite voluminous research being carried out and subsequent publication of findings, there are groups who still continue to believe that climate change is a hoax which strongly echoes the ethos of Dr. Joseph Haldane’s words “...ignorance is the biggest fear” (Haldane, 2018). The other fearful future relating to our area of work is when dissemination of climate change research findings creates only panic by stating how the world is heading towards doom without sharing corrective measures which can prevent or check the levels of such catastrophe. In this study, we also explore how communication in general can combat such fearful futures illuminated by practices adopted in DECCMA as shared in Table 2 below.

<b>Combatting through</b>	<b>Practices in DECCMA</b>
Facts	Findings have emerged out of rigorous research and data which have enabled us to examine existing facts and establish new facts.
Balance of facts, figures and personal voices	Attempted to balance facts, figures and personal voices through a blend of quantitative and qualitative data. The rigour of quantitative data and the richness of qualitative data have helped us better establish facts.
Targeted communication	Communicated was targeted for a range of stakeholders, government, non-governmental organisations, media, policy makers etc.
Sharing sustainable solutions	When research findings made their point, it was time to give way to recommendations which give hope instead of causing panic. If messages only cause panic, the purpose of communication is defeated since “critical facts and figures are not relevant when people are already afraid” as fears are guided by our unconscious while facts are processed by our critical minds. (Adlmaier-Herbst, 2018)
Engaging modes of communication	In DECCMA, we had the freedom to explore a variety of outputs – blogs, online articles, policy briefs, videos, infographics, photo-stories etc. which have enabled us to spread our research messages across a wide range of audience.

**Table 2 DECCMA's practices of combatting fearful futures with effective communication**

### **Times are changing**

“...If your time to you  
Is worth savin’  
Then you better start swimmin’  
Or you’ll sink like a stone.  
For the times they are a-changin’.” (Dylan, 1964)

This very famous song by Bob Dylan highlights that times are changing and at this critical juncture where we are aware of fearful futures and have the understanding to combat those, we cannot afford to stop by convincing ourselves that we have done enough. We need to start swimming and our tools and media of research

communication need to further adapt and evolve. To share the idea of adapting and evolving further, the following three examples are being used –

- Drone footage of flooding in Volta delta, Ghana – Coastal flooding has long been a problem in the Volta delta and residents have pleaded to the authorities for coastal protection or resettlement options. The Ghanaian team of DECCMA recorded the magnanimity of this problem using a drone. This powerful use of media motivated the Member of Parliament of the district to escalate this issue in the District Assembly, where options are currently being considered. The video shows how the sea ferociously advances residential areas in the coast ("Volta Coastal Flooding Drone Footage - Feb 2016", 2016). Research had been done on the problem of flooding, evidences were produced, the affected families pleaded with authorities but the maximum impact was achieved with the employment of a new research output by using a new media.
- Viral video of weather announcement – Prior to the recent Hurricane Florence in North Carolina, USA, The Weather Channel used immersive mixed reality to convey the dangers of storm surge ("Storm Surge Like You've Never Experienced it Before", 2018). This use of new media helps authorities to visualise the probable impact of the disaster and modify their level of preparedness and also help create awareness among the people as to how high the water levels can go and at which point they should compulsorily comply with evacuation requests from authorities. This video has garnered more than 2 million views and many user comments stress as to how these 3D visuals helped them visualise the dangers.
- Virtual reality experience documenting asylum seekers – Photographer Michel Huneault chronicled more than 180 border interceptions of asylum seekers moving from the United States to Canada and created 32 moments resulting in an immersive experience in *Roxham* (2017) where one can see the images and hear real interactions between asylum seekers and police officers (Huneault, 2018). What is particularly interesting is that although the viewer sees the outline of an asylum seeker, their identities are protected by the photographer editing fabric on them; fabrics like blankets, tents, clothes etc. used by asylum seekers in Europe in 2015 (Enos, 2018). Since human migration has been a point of interest in DECCMA, this particular example stands out not only because it documents the migrant crises and ties two separate instances with the fabric of migration, but also since research ethics demand protection of the identity of respondents or subjects and *Roxham* achieves to do that and much more.



<http://michelhuneault.com/3/index.php/migration/intersection-2017/>

**Figure 3 Photographic example from Roxham (2017)**

Based on our data and evidence from DECCMA, it has been established that new outputs are more popular than traditional outputs, using social media to promote research results strengthen outreach, and strategizing ways to effective research communication can help in combatting fearful futures. Looking towards a future, the quest to innovate and evolve our modes of communication and outputs is necessary. So far our communications have made people see, hear and think but with a changing world and changing demands the next challenge is to make them feel.

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