

Writing for non-academic audiences

Walking the tight-rope: postgraduate experiences of publishing a policy report

Friederike Ziegler

My doctoral research involved participatory research on daily mobility and social exclusion for older people in County Durham. It was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council as part of its CASE funding scheme, which involves a partnership with an external funding partner. As part of the initial agreement with my CASE funding partner (Age Concern), I consented to write a project report with findings of the study. The report was to be a balanced but detailed account of factors that influence older peoples daily mobility from their perspectives. The aim was to improve the understanding of policy-makers and planners of the older peoples' service requirements locally and nationally. After discussions with my supervisors who have experience in writing reports and after having read some other policy reports I developed the structure and form of my own report which was entitled 'Getting Around' (available on www.ageconcern-durham.org.uk). The general contents and layout were discussed with Age Concern, but they had little input into the report at this stage (for later feedback see below).

Writing this report turned out to be quite a challenge for a number of reasons:

- 1 Various audiences:** The potential audiences for the report were policy-makers on a local and national level; voluntary organisations; local service providers; community organisations; older people (including the research participants) and the general public. There were pragmatic considerations to be taken into account. For instance the report provided a brief summary and overview of the findings as well as 'implications for practice'. Many policy-makers and professionals have little time to read a twenty-page report, so the summaries gave those individuals the most important information 'at a glance'. In addition, I provided an appendix with all comments made by participants village by village, in order to provide local service providers with a basis for improvements and action. To make the main part of the report more readable and interesting, participants' quotes were interspersed, adding authentic voices to illustrate the description and analysis. The final report was distributed to all participants, as well as professionals dealing with services that affect older people such as policy-makers and planners on County and District levels (e.g. transport), Primary Care Trusts, Social Services and voluntary organisations.
- 2 The participatory process:** An important part of the participatory approach of this research involved feedback sessions with participants and funding partners in order to give them an opportunity to comment on the draft report and request additions or changes (see Section 4.3 for more on publishing from participatory research). Participants made few changes to the document, except for requesting that the general language and tone of the report be changed from being 'gloomy' about decline in mobility in old age, to being positive about the active and enjoyable lives that most older people have. The resulting changes did not appeal to the funding partner because of their own agenda.
- 3 Hidden agendas and compromises:** The funding partner's intention was to use the research findings to support applications for funding from statutory agencies to provide much-needed services to older people. This agenda required older people to be portrayed as in need of support, which conflicted with participants' own positive portrayal of their lives. As a compromise I agreed to add a special section to the report, which gave an account of the lives and specific needs of participants with physical disabilities or sensory impairments. The report was initially to be about 20 pages long but in the end contained 30 pages with the requested additions and appendices.

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Although writing a report from a collaborative and participatory research project can be challenging, I found it a worthwhile and positive experience. The funding partner as well as policy-makers, service providers and planners showed interest in the project findings reported, and some have taken action in line with the recommendations. The report also demonstrated to research participants that their input had been taken seriously and participants themselves told me that they found the report an interesting and enjoyable read.

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For your eyes only... not any more! Writing for different readerships

Alasdair Pinkerton

For almost twenty years of my formal education, from primary school to PhD, the act and art of 'writing' was consistently emphasised as the key means of expressing scholarly thoughts, opinions and critical reflections. And yet besides the occasional schoolboy treatise or student newspaper article these creative expressions were locked into a private dialogue between student and teacher. Writing was safe, secure, and absolutely not in the public domain. This was writing with a safety net...and it doesn't last forever.

For me, the safety net was removed in late 2005 when, as part of an ESRC initiative, I was awarded a placement within the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST). The aim was to intensively research the lively issue of 'pervasive computing' – an active subject within Information Technology, with significant privacy, safety and environmental implications – and produce a four-page briefing document highlighting all the major policy areas affected. The audience could, in theory, be any interested party, but 'POSTnote' briefings were aimed at busy politicians who wanted a brief overview of contemporary science and technology issues. Sentences were to be short and punchy. "Think *Daily Mail*", I was told, "maximum fourteen words per sentence". The information had to be clear, removed of technical jargon, and grounded with case studies. And yet it also had to reflect the complexities of the subject matter, and the viewpoints of multiple – often diametrically opposed – stakeholders. The challenge was enormous, and the learning curve was greater still. These early lessons, though, have proved invaluable.

Lesson number one: Think about *audiences*. Politicians, it was made clear, demand a very different kind of writing than do academic geographers and I had to learn to constrain any discussions of purely theoretical interest. Much like when communicating with journalists, writing for policy-makers demands a brevity and cogency rarely found in academic journals. This is not to say that the ideas and issues under discussion have to be simple and/or simplified; only that the writing has to relay complexities in a straightforward, transparent, and (ideally) eye-catching way. This is especially important when promoting your research in the form of press briefings/releases. As my university's press officer reminded me recently, these should be no longer than one side of A4 with a clear and logical structure. Most importantly, though, they should be intriguing to the journalistic imagination. When I was drafting a press briefing to promote a conference commemorating seventy-five years of the BBC World Service, for example, it was clear the timeliness of the anniversary would provide instant media appeal. Details of my own conference presentation, meanwhile, keyed into the media's fascination with 'the unexpected' by highlighting the counter-intuitive results of my research.

Lesson number two: *know your publications*. In the course of my writing so far I have found myself developing multiple 'voices' tailored both to discrete audiences (academic, political, professional) and a range of different publications. But really 'getting to know' these publications – especially academic journals – can be an intimidating process. Senior academics tend to talk about Editors like old friends (as often they are), while rarefied discussions over the 'tactics' and 'strategies' of publishing in the 'right' journals can give the impression of intellectual exclusivity and an academic 'clubiness'. In my experience, though, these discussions will very quickly begin to make more sense as your exposure to the 'journal landscape' develops. In the twelve months since passing my PhD I have submitted four papers to journals across a range of academic disciplines – from human geography and South Asian studies, to twentieth century British history. This was in part a considered 'strategy' to try and share my research – itself interdisciplinary in nature – with a wide potential readership. It also reflected rather less lofty, but equally important, concerns over publishing schedules, 'stylistic fit' and (as a new researcher) the opportunity to be considered for essay prizes. With each new submission my understanding of journal processes – particularly the provision of reviewer comments and/or amendments – has been significantly enhanced, which leads me to...

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Lesson number three: *have confidence in your own abilities*. It is very easy to feel downhearted when you receive reviewer comments from an academic or parliamentary publication. It may appear that your long-toiled-over work has been picked to the bones, condemning you to months of revisions. From my experience, it is almost never that bad. Reviewer feedback has been, in general, fundamentally positive and constructive, and frequently points to a number of specific areas for improvement. That is not to say that I have agreed with all the 'improvements' suggested, many of which have been – courteously, professionally and with an air of confidence – acknowledged, and put aside for another occasion.

Writing for publication has involved a steep learning curve, while demanding a good dose of self-confidence and a willingness to really think about the audiences and publications involved. It has proved daunting, but also profoundly rewarding. My parliamentary POSTnote, for example, has been used as the basis for a debate in the House of Lords, and I recently heard that one of my papers has been short listed for a journal's essay prize. *For Your Eyes Only?* Not any more!

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