

GUIDE FOR AFRICAN JOURNALISTS: Communicating research findings to laypeople



Guide N° 9

SYNOPSIS

This guide aims to boost journalists' performance in communicating research findings, by extracting the right information from research reports to present to their readers, whether the public or policy makers. It aims to help African journalists (and communication specialists and editors) to develop tools and skills to explain research findings from these types of reports. It shows how to find research reports and findings; assess and interpret research findings; write news articles using research findings; work with statistics and illustrations; and improve uptake among readers. It also presents tips and resources for journalists' research. It ends with a "10-point distillation" for communicating research findings to the layperson.

Among the key findings: African researchers generate much important information on development sectors, but their research findings are nearly always presented in scientific papers, sometimes written in an inaccessible style and poorly promoted (which prevents the public from understanding and using them). Research results are of little value unless they are cleanly communicated to others.

The main conclusions: Communicating research findings is a process that transforms raw research data into information that helps people decide. Research findings can transform people's lives, but too often come in long reports or scientific papers that, even if free to access, are hard for the layperson—citizens and policy makers—to comprehend.

The key lessons: The Relay program from Panos has four useful hints: Hook your audience, explain specialist terminology, be selective, and use direct quotes from the researcher.

The main recommendations: When trying to argue a point, African journalists are strongly advised to use credible documented statistics to support their arguments. They should also include sources of data, so that the reader is aware of any possible bias; Keep a record of research organizations and share this growing "database" with colleagues; Keep in touch with researchers and ask them to notify them of their current and future projects; Sign up to mail-outs from research organizations, especially communication officers who can be good allies.

Introduction

Research communication is the process of interpreting or translating (usually) complex research findings into a language, format, and context that non-experts—the layperson—can understand. Mass media, such as television, newspapers, radio, and magazines, are powerful communication tools for African journalists to reach a wide range of consumers. Their use to publicize research findings increases public awareness about issues and enables stakeholders to make decisions based on evidence.

African researchers generate much important information on development sectors, but their research findings are nearly always presented in scientific papers, sometimes written in an inaccessible style and poorly promoted (which prevents the public from understanding and using them). Research results are of little value unless they are cleanly communicated to others.

But as “Different stakeholders need different information, in different languages, using different terminology, delivered in formats that respect culture and norms” (Ulin and others 2005), African journalists play a critical role in transforming this information to consumers. Research findings can provide journalists with news stories, “pegs,” background information, statistics, case studies, and expert sources. African journalists, in particular, need to know how to how to communicate research findings in an accessible manner. The rest of this guide offers pointers on doing that.

Locating research reports and findings

Journalist’s Resource lists nine key steps based on Internet searches.¹ It emphasizes the Internet as a source of information. Google Scholar is excellent for academic publications, as Google is for general documents. Other search engines such as Yahoo! Search, Bing, and Ask serve similar purposes. The nine steps are:

- *Get organized.* Create records of your strategy and searches to avoid repeating searches in the same resources.
- *Articulate the topic clearly and concisely, and use examples.* Write the topic in a clear and concise manner. For example, if you are writing a story about the effect of girls’ education on economic development, a statement of the topic might be “Investment in girls’ education is a strong driver of economic development.”
- *Locate background information.* Consult subject-specific literature sources such as books, encyclopedias, and so on.
- *Identify information needs.* For background information use subject-specific encyclopedias, dictionaries, books, scholarly articles, and organizations’ websites. Use more than one source of data including academic, nongovernmental organization, and other literature.
- *List keywords and concepts for search engines and databases.* Indicate theories on causes, effects, and controversies around an issue. Indicate the geographic, demographic, and other characteristics of populations under study. List key words and alternatives to cover possible sources of data on different sites. Start by taking out the most important words and phrases from the questions produced in the previous phase. Then think about alternative words and phrases, because concepts can be referred to differently or be spelled differently depending on country of origin or field of study.
- *Consider the scope of your topic.* Identify the scope of your topic, taking into account date, publication, language, and so on. Use advanced search options to mitigate these limitations.
- *Conduct searches.* There are free sources of data and others accessible only by subscription. Despite continuous efforts to promote open-access publishing, access to scientific publications often requires a subscription. But access through the local library is available for most article databases. Should you not have access to any subscription resources appropriate for the topic, look at some of the many useful free

¹ <http://journalistsresource.org>.

resources on the Internet (World Bank, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, and so on).

- *Evaluate the information sources found.* There is a need for a critical approach to data sources depending on their provenance, authorship, reputation, and interest in the data that might generate bias and other inaccuracies. The evaluation of the information source is critical to sort out the most dependable sources. Journalism's five W's and one H (from Journalist's Resource) provide guidance:
 - Who: Who is the author and what are his/her credentials in this topic?
 - What: Is the material primary or secondary in nature?
 - Where: Is the publisher or organization behind the source considered reputable?
 - When: Is the source up to date or does it cover the right time period for your topic?
 - Why: Is the opinion or bias of the author apparent and can it be taken into account?
 - How: Is the research well documented for your needs?
- *Analyze and adjust the research strategy.* Research might not be collected for the purposes that suit the journalist's agenda. Using alternative expert and other sources of information is important, rather than trying to shape the evidence to suit the point the journalist wishes to make. This step rests on how well the journalist captured the information needed. If not so well, there may be different keywords and concepts you could have tried. At this point, additional background information might be needed to get alternative concepts to use. It is also possible that the information needed is just not available in the form, so that it may be necessary to contact an expert on the topic or a professional librarian for assistance.

Assessing and interpreting research findings

There are different ways of checking the quality and credibility of research findings. The National Center for the Dissemination of Disability Research (NCDDR

2005) and Spencer and others (2003), underscore several assessment criteria for interpreting research findings: relevance, validity, reliability, consistency, and standard of reporting. African journalists might consider following the Relay program from Panos London:

- *Read carefully.* Seek clarification of words, concepts, and issues you do not understand through dictionaries and consulting researchers for explanations of findings.
- *Look at the sample size.* Consider sample size because it influences the validity of research findings. Consult expert opinion if you are not sure of the findings or of their validity and reliability.
- *Ask who funded the research.* Most studies will have an acknowledgments section, often with information on who funded the research. It is important to see that, as it may indicate a level of bias in the research. You can get more information by asking the researcher during your interview (below).
- *Ask yourself questions.* "What's new about the research?" and "Is it relevant to my audience?" If it's neither newsworthy nor relevant you will have to start the search again.
- *Contact researchers.* Contact details of authors are generally listed in the research paper. If not, type their name into a search engine and it will often return their contact details. It is advisable to send a preliminary email explaining what you need from the author, permission to ask questions (box 1), and their availability. Then state when the deadline is, to encourage them to get in touch on time.

Box 1. General questions to ask the researcher

What are your main findings?
 What is new about your research?
 Can you explain your methodology?
 What policy recommendations do your findings suggest?
 Do your findings contradict any views or sources? If so, which ones?
 How is your research meaningful for the ordinary person?

- *Follow up with an interview.* It is best to speak to the researcher. A telephone call enables you to ask further questions and clarify areas of confusion, but email may be the quickest way to get answers to questions, especially if the researcher is in the field, or in a different time zone, or short of time. Interviewing researchers is one of the best ways to get insight and better interpret the research findings. If you get an interview, simply explain the purpose of the article and explain that you need to communicate using plain language. Keep questions simple.

Writing news articles using research findings

The main task before you start writing the story is organizing your information properly, so that it reflects the key points and quotations to support it. A good story is typically organized into four parts: headline; lead; heart of the story; and conclusion.

Headline

The headline must appear as the most important part of a story. If your headline doesn't catch readers' attention, your story is unlikely to be read. Story titles should be clear enough to show the story's content.

Lead

The lead is the first part of a news story. A good lead is used to grab the readers' attention and persuade them to keep reading. A lead may comprise one to two sentences in the opening paragraph, or a separate introduction.

There are two main types of leads (box 2):

- *Direct lead.* Also referred to as summary lead, this reveals what the story is about by answering the questions who, what, where, why, and how. African journalists starting their career are encouraged to use this type of lead.
- *Delayed lead.* This sets a scene or a mood of the story with an incident or anecdote rather than answering the who, what, where, why, and how questions right away. It creates

anticipation and gives the reader a reason to keep reading.

Box 2. Illustration of leads

Example of a bad lead

"Leading scientists are very proud to announce a treatment against Malaria. This is a key achievement in fighting the disease giving hope to governments and millions of threatened people in the continent."

Why is it a bad lead? It is too wordy with too many clauses. It addresses only what (treatment against malaria) and who (leading scientists).

Examples of good leads

"Scientists in South Africa announced the successful treatment of malaria fever monkeys. The encouraging results were published in the Africa Journal of Science Translational Medicine in November 2015."

This lead captures what (successful treatment of malaria fever), how (through research published in a journal), where (South Africa), and who (leading scientists). It is clear, concise, and gets straight to the point. It also grabs the reader's attention.

"The malaria epidemic, which is out of control in most African countries and directly threatening lives of children under five in the continent, may not end until the world has a vaccine against the disease, according to one of the scientists who discovered the parasite."

This is a delayed lead, but it also grabs readers' attention.

Whatever the style adopted, the most important information must appear at the beginning of the story. Supporting details follow.

Heart of the story

The heart of the story will answer in more detail the key questions about who, what, where, why, and how. This structure helps to make the story flow well and be easily understandable. The following are key tips for developing sentences and paragraphs:

- Preferably, only one main point should be developed per paragraph. The first sentence

should contain the main idea of the paragraph, while the following sentences bring supporting elements with examples and illustrations, including statistics. The last sentence should be a “transitional” sentence that leads to the next paragraph. Transition words help to link ideas from different sentences.

- Keep paragraphs and sentences short—rigorous editing is highly recommended. You can achieve brevity by seeking the simplest way to say everything. If your idea stands well without an extra sentence or word, cut them down. Only one idea should be developed per sentence for readability. Avoid jargon when writing for laypeople or non-expert readers. Abbreviations and acronyms should be employed sparingly and clarified at first reference.
- Use quotations only if appropriate, and write in the active voice.

Conclusion

The conclusion is the ending paragraph of the story and is just as important as the lead. It gives readers an opportunity to think about the content. But this paragraph should not take the form of a simple repetition of information already presented.

A story can end in different ways, such as the circle ending and the quote ending.

- A circle ending means the journalist returns to a key point or idea mentioned in the lead, but does not repeat it.
- In a quote ending, the conclusion is drawn from a quote that ties the story, and gives it a kind of sense of objectivity.

Hints from the Relay program

The Relay program from Panos has four useful hints:

- *Hook your audience.* Be clear about the focus of your article in the first paragraph to identify the most newsworthy aspect of the research. This should be the first line of the article. Below is an introduction to a feature:

Macho culture in Sub-Saharan African prisons is helping to fuel the spread of tuberculosis (TB) among male inmates, according to researchers. A new study

suggests that male inmates are reluctant to tell their cellmates they are ill and fail to seek medical attention in case they appear weak.

- *Explain specialist terminology.* Most readers have little knowledge of the jargon used in development or scholastic fields, and few have a good background in statistics or research methods, so explain the terms used in the research with simple language.
- *Be selective.* Research papers often have several points to make. It is impossible to include every point in a 500-word article. It is better to just pick out two or three points and explain these in detail.
- *Use direct quotes from the researcher.* This is important as it gives the researcher a voice and adds color to the article.

Working with statistics and illustrations

According to the American Association of Statistics, statistics is the science of learning from data, and of measuring, controlling, and communicating uncertainty. It thereby provides the navigation essential for controlling the course of scientific and societal advances.

Statisticians apply statistical thinking and methods to a wide variety of scientific, social, and business endeavors in such areas as astronomy, biology, education, economics, engineering, genetics, marketing, medicine, psychology, public health, sports—among many. Statistics can help to present data in a meaningful way.

When trying to argue a point, African journalists are strongly advised to use credible documented statistics to support their arguments. They should also include sources of data, so that the reader is aware of any possible bias. Statistics are not just numbers, but numbers are referred to by various terms.

Livingston and Voakes (2011) make the point that there is no way to avoid use of numbers/statistics, especially among journalists. Whether you are reporting on local tax rates, school district budgets,

box office receipts, medical research reports, environmental impact reports, or any other subject that most journalists consider newsworthy, it is likely that you will encounter numbers. They argue that skills in math and statistics make you a better journalist:

- You can make accurate, reliable computations, which enable you to make pointed comparisons, put facts into perspective, and lend important context to stories.
- You can protect yourself from being fooled by inaccurate presentations of data, whether willfully spun or carelessly relayed. If you value independence as a cornerstone of journalism ethics, part of that independence must be the ability to assess numerical information without relying on the source.
- You can ask proper questions about numerical matters.
- You can translate complicated numbers for your viewers and readers in ways they can readily understand.
- You can make your writing livelier, because numbers give you precision.

Numbers convey meaning, but too many journalists skirt the numerical parts of their fact gathering and information sharing, because they think they are incompetent with numbers (Livingston and Voakes 2011). Consider the following: Which is better?

- The city council approved a budget increase of \$39.2 million.
- The city council approved a budget increase of 17 percent.

It is the second sentence, because the quantity 17 percent has more immediate meaning to readers than the quantity \$39.2 million, especially with no context (Livingston and Voakes 2011).

Nguyen and Lugo-Ocando (2015) argue that statistics are not distant from the news: They are at the heart of journalism; that statistics are not mathematics: They are about the application of the same kind of logical and valid reasoning needed for other types of news material; and that statistics are neither cold

nor boring: They are an endless source of inspiration for much excellent journalism.

Statistics have long been a staple of daily news, from “hard news” about politics, economics, business, finance, science, and education to “softer” categories such as health, crime, sports and entertainment, community, or other areas of social life. And it is likely to become even more so in the future, when the “big data” society is gradually normalized.

“You don’t need to be a nerd to improve your reporting of news with numbers,” says Deborah Potter (2009). “You just need to remember one basic, journalistic question: Does this make sense?” Some basic knowledge of statistics is essential but what journalists need the most is not a set of skills to calculate or create their own data but one to use logical, valid reasoning, and journalistic skepticism to:

- Find and acquire data.
- Explore and evaluate data's real meaning in context.
- Investigate non-numerical factors shaping them.
- Report them in a fair, accurate, accessible, and engaging manner.

All this does not require any special math skills. If they can add, subtract, divide, and multiply, journalists can learn to handle statistics for the news, as long as they are willing to apply to data the same probing and enquiring mind essential for any other news work.

Improving uptake

The following five factors are important for communicating research findings, as they enhance uptake among the target audience.

- *Relevance.* Research findings should be applicable to the life and work of the target user.
- *Timeliness.* They should be published when the issue is current.

- *Packaging.* The material should be easy to access and read, and convenient in cost, time, and effort.
- *Value added.* The findings must be different, not pedestrian, and must bring new ideas to the public.
- *Ownership.* Research developed and conducted with the involvement of the potential user is more beneficial.

Further tips for African journalists

The following are additional tips:

- Keep a record of research organizations and share this growing “database” with colleagues.
- Keep in touch with researchers and ask them to notify you of their current and future projects.
- Sign up to mail-outs from research organizations, especially communication officers who can be good allies.
- Double-check the statistics and other research cited in the study. For example, if the researcher uses someone else’s theory or statistics and you want to include them in your article, you must attribute them.
- Be mindful of time zones, as this can make a big difference if you have a tight deadline.
- Remind researchers of deadlines. This is especially important if you are conducting the interview by email.
- Ask the researchers’ permission to use their contact and job details, if used in the article.
- Keep a record of your articles so you can see what topics you are doing at any point, so you don’t repeat a topic.
- Plan. Make sure there is enough time for the researcher to respond and to write up the feature before the deadline.
- Get interested in a topic and develop your expertise.

Resources for journalist research reporting

A range of resources can help journalists in research reporting. Two are:

- The National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting Practical Guide, through Poynter, offers Five Tips for getting started with computer-assisted reporting.
- The 10 Tools to analyze datasets more efficiently, through Hacks/Hackers, is a global movement bringing together computer programmers and investigative journalists to tell powerful data-driven stories. Training through regional chapters and other resources can be accessed via <http://gijn.org/resources/data-journalism/>.

Ten-point distillation

This guide concludes with a concise 10 points of advice for African journalists, communication specialists, and editors for using research findings in writing articles for the layperson.

- Avoid biased writing, that is, do not show favoritism toward a specific view point.
- Be direct: Use active verbs (avoid the passive voice), and write in the third person.
- Consider your audience, and ensure your story deals with what they need to know; make sure you are clear about what action you want your audience to engage in after reading your article.
- Double-check the statistics and other research data cited in the study.
- Make the story concise (one page indicative), and use simple, non-academic language.
- Organize the story in a logical and transparent way, for readability. You might use subheadings to structure the story if the theme developed is too long or complex.
- Use keywords in the headline, catching the reader’s attention.
- Address the who, what, when, where, and why questions in the first paragraph.
- Use short sentences (one sentence to explain one idea).
- Take care of the ending paragraph for a lasting effect on the reader.

References

- Livingston, C., and P. Voakes. 2011. *Working with Numbers and Statistics: A Handbook for Journalists*. London: Routledge.
- NCDDR (The National Center for the Dissemination of Disability Research). 2005. *Focus: What Are the Standards for Quality Research?* Technical Brief Number 9. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. http://ktdrr.org/ktlibrary/articles_pubs/ncddr_work/focus/focus9/Focus9.pdf (accessed November 5 and 6, 2015).
- Nguyen, A., and J. Lugo-Ocando. 2015. *Introduction: The State of Data and Statistics in Journalism and Journalism Education: Issues and Debates*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1464884915593234>
- PANOS. 2011. *A Journalist's Guide to Reporting Research Findings*. London. <http://panos.org.uk/wp-content/files/2011/06/A-journalists-guide-to-reporting-research-findings.pdf> (accessed November 6, 2015).
- Spencer, L., J. Ritchie, J. Lewis, and L. Dillon. 2003. *Quality in Qualitative Evaluation: A Framework for Assessing Research Evidence*. London: Government Chief Social Researcher's Office, The Cabinet Office. https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/166_policy_hub_a_quality_framework.pdf (accessed November 6, 2015).
- Ulin, P., E. Robinson, and E. Tolley. 2005. *Making Research Findings Actionable: A Quick Reference to Communicating Health Information for Decision Making*. Washington, DC and Chapel Hill, NC: U.S. Agency for International Development and MEASURE Evaluation.



Acknowledgement

This knowledge series intends to summarize good practices and key policy findings on managing for development results (MfDR). African Community of Practice (AfCoP) knowledge products are widely disseminated and are available on the website of the Africa for Results initiative, at: www.afrik4r.org/page/resources.

This AfCoP-MfDR knowledge product is a joint work by the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) and the African Development Bank (AfDB). This is one of the knowledge products produced by ACBF under the leadership of its Executive Secretary, Professor Emmanuel Nnadozie.

The product was prepared by a team led by the ACBF's Knowledge, Monitoring, and Evaluation Department (KME), under the overall supervision of its Director, Dr. Thomas Munthali. In the KME Department, Ms. Aimtonga Makawia coordinated and managed producing the product while Dr. Barassou Diawara, Mr. Kwabena Boakye, Ms. Anne Francois and M. Thoto Frejus and other colleagues provided support with initial reviews of the manuscripts. Special thanks to colleagues from other departments of the Foundation who also supported and contributed to producing this paper. The ACBF is grateful to the AfDB for helping produce this case study under grant number 2100150023544.

The ACBF is also immensely grateful to Dr Aneth Elly, who is the main contributor, for sharing the research work contributing to the development of this publication. We also thank independent reviewers whose insightful external reviews enriched this knowledge product. The Foundation also wishes to express its appreciation to AfCoP members, ACBF partner institutions, and all individuals who provided inputs critical to completing this product. The views and opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the official position of the ACBF, its Board of Governors, its Executive Board, or that of the AfDB management and board nor the secretariats of the AfCoP-MfDR project.