NOTE #11

Achieving impact: some arguments for designing a communications strategy

By Josepine Fernow
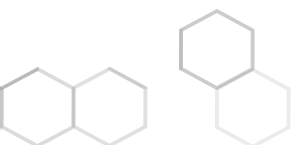
RRI IMPLEMENTATION
IN BIOSCIENCE ORGANISATIONS

GUIDELINES FROM THE STARBIOS2 PROJECT

Andrea Declich with the STARBIOS2 partners

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Achieving impact: some arguments for designing a communications strategy

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Practicing RRI implies that we make an effort to communicate beyond our peers, opening up research organisations and extending our reach to public policy makers and researchers in other fields. To achieve impact, researchers need to find new ways of interacting with actors outside their own fields. Ideally also doing it well, without wasting time, while maintaining public trust, and without contributing to misconceptions about what science can deliver.

Is this not what we do already? Yes and no. Academic research is driven by dissemination of results: aiming to reach peers by presenting and discussing results at the conferences they attend, and publishing in the journals they read. How do we move from sharing results to having a real impact on the structures we want to change? The biosciences depend on public trust: To receive public funding for research, to recruit research participants, and to gain acceptance for the outputs. And if that trust is lost along the way, it will be difficult to regain (Caulfield, 2005). As if this is not enough: Transferring technology from the academic domain into clinical or commercial applications requires trust from both the public *and* policy makers (Bubela, Hagen & Einsiedel, 2012). Is this a problem? Well, maybe…

If scientists frame technological advances in new ways, they might be able to capture the imagination of investors, politicians and funding agencies. This matters in a democratic society, where members of the public can influence their representatives, who in turn make decisions on both research funding and regulation, which is a very good argument for maintaining public trust (Bubela,

2006). Funding agencies are increasingly asking researchers to show how their work will have an impact. This requires new skills from scientists, who need to be able to think about what their contribution to society will be and design strategies to achieve impact.

Why does this matter to me? Bioscience can bring benefits for both individuals and society in the form of new treatments, resilient plants, or new foods. It has been claimed that scientists themselves have a professional responsibility to communicate their knowledge, along with their views on potential applications (Reydon, Kampourakis & Patrinos, 2012). However, if scientists over-promise, it can erode trust, and bad communication can lead to the *research hype paradox*. This means that if the public buys the hype, it could become more difficult to do research (Caulfield, 2005). Because of the huge potential benefits, research hype is a real threat for bioscience. As members of the public, we are all in a sense future patients, future consumers and future beneficiaries of all that science brings, the good and the bad. This means we all have a stake in research. Your project's communication strategy becomes important with the realization that media is part of a filter that science has to pass through before reaching the public. Although there is no linear relationship between how media portrays science and public opinion about it, the public only has access to information in the public domain (Caulfield, 2005).

Is this a problem? Perhaps, depending on how you view the public. Scientists tend to think that the public lacks knowledge about scientific issues, and that this lack of knowledge shapes public opinion on risks, policies and decisions. Scientists also tend to view the public as homogenous: either as one uniform group of non-experts, or as a range of distinct (but homogenous) groups of 'lay people' (Besley & Nisbet, 2013). In reality, however, the public is actually a heterogeneous and abstract collective (Condit, 2001) that consists of *everyone* in society (Burns et al., 2003). In other words, you need to figure out who you really want to talk to, and develop a strategy to achieve your goals. Designing communication or

public engagement activities requires dividing this collective into a series of overlapping publics that also includes scientists, mediators and decision makers (Burns et al., 2003).

How do I translate that into a communication strategy? First, we have to remember that communication is not just for the lay public. Your strategy should also include measures to do cross-disciplinary and cross-professional communication. Bioethicists need to understand the science behind the ethical, legal and social issues they research, and clinicians need to understand the biology behind the test results they give to patients. In an ideal world, dissemination and communication activities would foster buy-in to your results, followed by a readiness to implement them. However, **how** to do this requires some thinking. First, it is important to decide **what** it is you want to achieve, by describing **why** there is a need to communicate. The next question to answer is **who** you want to reach, followed by **how** to do that, and **when** would be a good time to talk to them.

A scientific dissemination strategy can help support impact by making outputs **discoverable and findable**. Taking some time to identify how and where your audiences would look for information about your work can be helpful when you design your publication strategy. Picking the 'right' journal for your publication, and ensuring open access (not forgetting that you can do self-archiving once the journal embargo ends), also helps ensure it is **available**. Adding communication tools, like editorial text, press activities and social media can amplify the dissemination of results and help make outputs **visible** for a larger group of people. This kind of complementary communication tools can help make the results **relevant** for other audiences. You can reach other stakeholders if you re-frame and adapt your results. Communication activities can also help make the outputs **understandable**. Either by translating your text to another language, or by adapting the message to other audiences, ranging from high-school children, to people with PhD's in social science, humanities, or physics.

Where do I start? To develop a strategy for communicating about this very guideline, STARBIOS2 started with a simple post-it brainstorming SWOT analysis exercise to identify the project's strengths and weaknesses, the opportunities we have to communicate about them, and potential threats to our communications. This is a good starting point to build a set of tools and tactics, which in essence is a list of different ways to exploit the opportunities, followed by a list of ways to mitigate the threats. An opportunity can be attending a conference to present results, the tactic to submit an abstract for a presentation, and the tool the presentation itself. A threat could be a competing initiative coming out with results at the same time, the tactic to mitigate that risk to approach that project and see if there are any avenues of collaboration, and the tool a joint publication or workshop.

What does this mean in practice? The point of the STARBIOS2 project is having impact in the organisations that implement Action Plans. To achieve change, it has been essential to identify the right messages, the right people, and the best arguments to make them want to contribute. Impactful change is a process of co-creation, between different agents and organisational structures. We can use the voices of these agents to advocate for structural change. Using dissemination, communication and advocacy to extend this project's impact to other organisations. Moreover, we can use these tools to share our results and contribute to developing research about RRI.

This very guideline was developed to create organisational change in the *biosciences*. Our stakeholders consist of individual *bioscientists*, in different fields, as well as structures in universities and other research-performing organisations, that do not constitute a homogeneous audience. Our stakeholders extend to the EU and national research policy makers and research funding organisations. Before we speak, we need to know what to say, who to say it to, and why we address them.

ABOUT THE STARBIOS2 GUIDELINES

This guideline aims to help readers formalize and trigger structural change aimed at introducing appropriate RRI-related practices to their own organisations. This is not a series of prescriptions, but an itinerary of reflection and self-interpretation addressed to different actors within the biosciences. To support this itinerary of reflection and self-interpretation, the document provides...

· a description of a general RRI Model for research organisations within the biosciences, that is a set of ideas, premises and "principles of action" that define the practice of RRI in bioscience research organisations,

· some practical guidance for designing interventions to promote RRI in research organisations in the Biosciences, putting into practice the RRI Model,

· a set of useful practices in implementing the structural change process,

· and information on particular STARBIOS2 cases and experiences, as well as materials, tools and sources, are also provided in the Appendix and in the Annex.