

# Red riding hood and the Big Bad Wolf: Advice for effective science communication

## Summary

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- It should be admitted that cognitive biases usually blamed to policymakers are also found in the scientific community.
  - There are three things to consider to establish an effective communication channel between scientists and policymaking: selective information to be shared, appropriate timing to act, engagement with real policy making is expected.
  - The message is scientists should put themselves in the policymakers' shoes and instead of sitting back and waiting for policymakers to change, they should also think how to adapt their strategy to approach them.
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We have all heard and read the story of Little Red Riding hood. The Big Bad Wolf had dark, interior motives for his behaviour, he never heard what Little Red Riding Hood said – or heard it but still proceeded with his own pre-decided plan. In the narrative of lack of evidence-based policymaking worldwide, the reasons are mostly attributed to the rigidity and stubbornness of policymakers – the wolf; while scientists have been portrayed as the innocent Little Red Riding hoods that always act out of their own self-sacrificing position and with society's (granny?) benefit before and above everything else (Jasanoff and Simmet 2017).

Cairney and Kwiatkowski (2017) as summarised here aim at reconciling the Little Red Riding Hoods with the Big Bad Wolf. They suggest a communication strategy to bridge the gap between the two, while stressing that the cognitive biases usually attributed to policymakers are the same that scientists and members of the communities also have. They source the steps of this strategy in the psychology and policy literature.

Elected policymakers cannot comprehend all the things they are responsible for and be experts in all of them. Expecting them to produce policies that are coherent, inclusive and participatory while taking into consideration the latest development in science is at least unfair (P. Cairney 2016, Parkhurst 2016).

Policymakers have to make decisions in a timeous manner and oftentimes, based on their own ethic systems and beliefs. Scientists open continuous channels of communication with the policymakers by presenting evidence in a manner that minimises cognitive load and ensuring feedback is requested and used to inform science too. Policymakers reflect group emotions, and thus scientists should frame new evidence in a manner that represents how society understand the world, by making use of storytelling and framing (Weible, et al. 2012).

Timing is crucial in ensuring the effective conveyance of scientific evidence that can influence policies. From the perspective of psychology, an individual cannot function in the expected way under certain stressful conditions (Witte and Allen 2000). That is complemented by policy studies that indicate that policymakers will give attention to a societal/policy problem at the right timing when they are convinced of its importance and afterwards, when motivated, they will listen to solutions (Zachariadis

2014). But Cairney and Kwiatkowski (2017) do not suggest to scientists to lie in and wait for problems to arise; on the contrary, the suggestion is to use this time to their advantage to “generate knowledge of the political system and its ‘rules of the game’”.

Instead of arguing that policymaking should change to be informed by evidence, which is the easy way out for scientists, it is time to think how the strategies to influence policy should be adapted to fit in to the “real” world. Challenging the status quo and suggesting an excellent scientific-based proposal to a societal problem will not be received in good light if a conducive and trustworthy environment between policymakers and scientists is not established first.

All in all, promoting evidence- and scientific-informed policies needs open communication from both the policymakers *and* scientists. Little Red Riding Hood should be able to put herself in the Big Bad Wolf’s shoes. The timing of their interaction, the way they approach each other, and establishing trust between the two of them are things to consider and who knows? Maybe Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf will become friends and take the food together to granny.

## References

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