

Gray literature: storytelling to influence evidence-based policy

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- Many authors interested in how to translate evidence into policy identify the importance of policy narrative and argue that advocates of scientific evidence need to tell good stories to grab the attention and appeal to the emotions of policymakers.
- The “grey” literature is often missed by scientists but more important to activists and advocates within social movements and the non-profit sector who frequently engage with or seek to influence policymakers.
- The article outlines some of the pathways in which an understanding of policymaker psychology and factors are reflected in the grey literature, and the implications of this for understanding the role of storytelling in political advocacy.

There is recognition within the academic literature focused on evidence-informed policy that scientists need a more sophisticated understanding of policymaker psychology and the role of factors such as group dynamics and the rules that people follow within organizations. There is also recognition that storytelling is an important messaging tactic that scientists need to learn to make use of in their communications strategies aimed at policymakers.

The article has attempted to show that there is a large body of grey literature —defined as literature which is produced by all levels of government, academics, business, and industry, but which is not controlled by commercial publishers from within the field of policy advocacy, that offers a great deal of practical, “how to” advice to researchers and scientists seeking to make use of the power of storytelling to influence policy. An effective storytelling strategy should include a storytelling goal, a story structure, an impactful story, highlighted with numbers, and visual storytelling. One great example is the “Here I Am Campaign: Giving statistics a human face,” campaign. The Global Fund was set up in 2002 as an international financing organization to attract and pool funds from donor nations and disburse money to countries in need of expanding prevention and treatment of HIV and Aids, Tuberculosis, and Malaria. As part of its efforts to advocate for full replenishment of the Fund, the Global Fund Advocates Network (GFAN) launched the Campaign, which told the stories of individuals who were benefiting from treatment paid for by the Fund, and thus were alive and thriving. The campaign gathered 198 short video testimonies from individuals around the world and made these available online on the campaign website and YouTube.

While the academic world of policy studies seems unaware of this wealth of practical resources, the grey literature seems unaware of the value that policy studies can offer. While much of this literature seems to draw on the fields of development studies, psychology, cognitive science, and communication, almost none of it drew on academic theories of policy processes. Sources that did reference a model of the “policy process” tended to rely on the outdated, simplistic, linear “policy cycle” model. This is unfortunate as policy advocates working within NGOs, foundations, and think tanks could greatly benefit from the potential strategic insights to be gained from more widespread familiarity with a broad range of policy concepts.

Be that as it may. For a scientist or social researcher interested in exploring storytelling as a communication tool, many of the resources and toolkits mentioned in this paper offer a good

place to start. For example, the Smart Chart (Spitfire Strategies, 2017) can be used as a first step, to flesh out a strategy. From there, The Message Box Workbook is helpful for distilling the essence of a message. The Frameworks Institute's resources offer guidance on how to structure a thematic story, as well as message research briefs on issues such as climate change, education, and health. Resource Media and the Tactical Technology Collective offer excellent free toolkits and tutorials in visual storytelling. This paper has served to highlight the wealth of resources that exists, and along with other papers in this series, will enable those interested to combine the insights available within the grey literature with those offered by more academic policy studies.

Article reviewed:

Davidson, B. Storytelling and evidence-based policy: lessons from the grey literature. *Palgrave Commun* **3**, 17093 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2017.93>