African Universities' Research Approaches (AURA) Programme Materials: Engaged Excellence in teaching and research

Online Conference: Researchers of the future: 21st Century Approaches for effective global research 2-4 November, 2015. Co-hosted by the AURA Programme and WHO HIFA-Fr.

The **AURA Programme Consortium** and **WHO HIFA-Fr**
are pleased to announce:

RESEARCHERS OF THE FUTURE: 21ST CENTURY APPROACHES FOR EFFECTIVE, GLOBAL RESEARCH

*An **online** learning event and facilitated discussion which will take place over three days:*

From 12.00/Midday to 15.00 GMT
Monday 2nd to **Wednesday 4th November, 2015**

Topic 3. How would a shift in research practice, applied in the social and digital environment, impact on the capabilities of researchers in the future?

Enrique Mendizabel, Founder of On Think Tanks

Hi, I don't know if this is being shown in the morning or the afternoon, so good day. My name is Enrique Mendizabal, I am the founder and director of On Think Tanks which is a platform that seeks to study and support policy research centers around the world. And I have been asked to give you a short talk about the future of researchers. The exact title is: "How would a shift in research practice, applied in the social and digital environment, impact on the capabilities of researchers in the future?" It took me a while to figure out what to say about this title so I have come up with a short presentation that I would share also in writing so I hope you enjoy it.

I think that new researchers in the future would need at least three skills:

They are going to have to be very good researchers, that is a given. They are going to have to be good managers, at least at the level of the research project. And they have to be good managers in respect to their projects. And they also have to be very good communicators, again at least internally, within their teams, within their organization, but increasingly towards their intended audiences.

Simon Maxwell, who was the former Director of the Overseas Development Institute, would have said that they also have to be great networkers and great fixers, referring to the need to understand and operate the political levers of change. So it is not enough to have a good idea and share it, you have got to know how to get your idea in the right place and to get the right people to listen to your idea.

These two last skills, if you want, I accept, can be much harder for some people to master and they could go beyond the standard job description expected from a researcher.

But good research, good management, and good communications should be, in my view, non-negotiable.

So what about being good communicators? I'm going to focus on this issue for this talk. And I think there are three aspects to being a good communicator as a researcher.

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First, researchers have to have very good interpersonal communication skills. This is the day to day communication skills. These are harder to master, I feel for some people. But they can be taught and should be taught at university. Often graduates arrive at the think tank without those skills and the first thing they need to learn is how to communicate their ideas to their peers, to their funders, to their immediate audiences. The graduates should be able to develop and communicate their arguments clearly to their peers and to others who are not familiar with their work or with the subject of their study. This should be basic. They must be very strong editors of their own work. Again, not something that is encouraged from researchers. They are good at running regression and presenting the table that came out of your software but not necessarily good at coming up with an argument to support that regression or to explain that regression and then being able to edit it in a way that different audiences would understand. These are crucial, I think, not only to influence others about the merits of our ideas but also to lead or work in teams, which increasingly in research centers around the world is going to be with people with different interests and different skills.

The second aspect to research communication is that researchers must have a very good knowledge of all the communication channels and tools available to them as well as how to use them.

This doesn't mean that they should have the same skills as a professional publications manger or a professional events manager, or a media officer, or a digital communications manager. I don't know how to set up a pre complicated and modern website, but I've learned to ask. I've learned to find out what needs to be done and ask somebody else who knows how to do it to do it for me. They should know about and understand these roles and the tools that can be used in each of these communication channels.

So they should understand what a communications officer is supposed to do, they should understand what a media officer is supposed to do, what they can do, and they should be able to have a conversation with them and that makes them an informed and educated client or educated partner.

They should, too, be able to produce at least some of the most basic communication tools under each channel. For instance, they should be able to do a literature review, a policy brief, a working paper, they should be able to write a blog post, they should be able to manage a twitter handle, produce basic static data visualisations using tools like Infogram that are available for everybody. They should be able to set-up a Google hangout to stream a workshop, although I wasn't able to do it today so I might edit that out.

They should be able to produce a public event and write its report and conduct a short interview for radio or tv or even record and edit a podcast or a video. These are tools that are increasingly popular and young researchers would have to learn them before they enter a think tank or as soon as they enter a research organization.

Now this is not a message that my generation would like to hear but I think it is not far-fetched to expect that younger researchers –certainly those entering the market right now- would have those skills already when they arrive.

The third point is that new researchers should be expected to have the capacity to make strategic choices about how to use the various channels and tools at their disposal. So you identify – we've got publications, we've got events, we have digital communication tools, we have media - how do we combine these different products in a way that maximizes the impact of your work?

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Here is where the concept of communications as orchestra can be of help. I introduced this topic in a workshop in Bangladesh and I can share more details about them through the organizers of this event. The idea is not… I don't think it's too complicated.

So ideally, in a research center, there will be a head of communications in charge of this. But in reality most communication activities in research centers around the world are and will be conducted at the level of the research project and by researchers themselves.

Researchers must know how to maximize the impact that the various communication tools they have at their disposal can have by combining them, by putting them together, very much in the same way as a conductor will do with an orchestra. You put together different instruments to create music.

The objective is quite simple: they must keep the audience engaged or, in terms more appropriate to us, we must keep our ideas on the public agenda for as long as possible in preparation to a possible (and only possible, lets' be honest) window of opportunity opening up. So you want to put your idea, you want to put your arguments, you want to put your suggestions, and your recommendations in a public space. You want to make sure they are on the agenda, that they are being discussed, they are being considered by those who make decisions at the time when the window of opportunity opens, crisis emerges, there is funding, there is political will, and they are looking for that idea. Your idea should be there.

This capacity to make strategic choices can be taught but is more likely to be developed through practice. And this means that research cannot be completely severed from communication. The best way of teaching a young researcher, a new researcher, how to make strategic use of all these communication tools is to actually put them in the place of using them. So to make them work alongside communicators, or to ensure that their job description isn't just research but includes the role of communicator as well.

And there is something about the disruptive role of digital channels and tools that affects this particularly and so I'm going to focus on the digital aspect of research communication.

To achieve this exposure, to maximize the exposure of our ideas, digital channels and tools offer opportunities that very few researchers today are taking full advantage of. And, this is I think across the board. So, I am not suggesting that this happens only in developing countries. This happens across the board. Of course, there is a lot more use of digital tools in Europe and the US than there is in Latin America or Africa but I don't think this is a situation where one is completely behind the other.

Now digital channels make it possible to structure this strategic combination of communication tools. For example, a simple (and free) Eventbrite page or a Wordpress site can allow a small team of researchers, or even a single researcher- to bring together a range of publications, videos, engagement activities such as events, online discussions on Twitter or Facebook, and efforts to reach out to the media into one place and that makes that space very powerful and robust when it comes to engaging with policy makers, when it comes to engaging with the media or other audiences.

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There are digital communication tools for pretty much every communication objective: for organizing events, for sending out invitations, for writing and publishing, for writing event reports, for announcements, hosting events, monitoring the impact of our research, etc.

In fact, there are digital tools for almost every research and management objective as well. It is possible to run an entire research project and even an entire research organization online, using digital tools, and most of them free digital tools. However, this can come at a cost to old and current research cultures.

Now here is where the disruptive nature of digital comes in.

I could talk about this for hours but I'm going to focus on one aspect of this disruption that I think is important and probably overlooked. This one relates to the capacity of researchers to take full advantage of the instruments in this orchestra. So how do you make sure you take full advantage of every single communication tool you have at your disposal?

To be able to do that, I think the researcher needs to become much more comfortable with criticism and even with being wrong. There is no direct link between the things I've just said, but I'll get back to that.

I think researchers need to be a lot more comfortable with receiving criticism, accepting criticism, even accepting that they would sometimes, often be wrong and just getting on with it.

Now, digital communications and digital research are not separate things, anymore. They are parts of the same whole. One can generate digital communication content while doing research, for example you can film or record interviews with your informants in your research projects. There is no need to take down notes and then transcribe those notes into a document and the document becomes a paper, and then you film the people you want to film to illustrate your argument. You can film them while you're doing the research.

And one can do research while doing communications. You can film and stream an event and use the recordings and the event itself to gather the information that you were hoping to gather from key informants.

Digital is also ongoing. It forces the researcher, it expects the researcher, to communicate right from the start. I think the first publication of every research project should be 'this is what I want to research'. It should be a publication that says 'this is what I want to research'. Look out for it, it is coming.

Digital is also open. Research can no longer be done in private, away from the prying eyes of your funders, of your peers, and their audiences. You can't take money from someone, from a funding agency or from your organization and go away for 6 months or a year and then come back with a book. If you are going to communicate through digital tools, if you are going to do research using digital tools, you are going to have to be engaging constantly along the way through the process. And you are going to have to be open about what you are doing, you are going to have to share.

Because digital is also is reciprocal. The most popular digital tools punish broadcast-only users. So if you send out information and you say 'meet me' and you are not actually engaging people, asking questions, engaging with them, it is going to be hard for you to take full advantage of them.

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They demand engagement. This culture extends to how people share data, how they share ideas, and how they share advice online. Researchers are now potential members of an infinite number of epistemic communities that can pop-up in response to a simple Tweet asking as question or for help. So in the past, we wanted to study Agricultural extension in Malawi, or we wanted to study the use of drones in Agricultural research in Peru. And you might have to seek funding to set up a community of practice around this issue. Nowadays, you go online, you ask a question on Twitter and you have a good hour invested in your network. You will get an immediate response from a number of people you can actually develop right there, pop up epistemic community or pop-up community of practice on the subject and solve the problem together.

Digital is also flexible. We hear stories all the time about cyber-bullying. We hear stories about huge fails that haunt people forever. But I think these are the exceptions to the rule. For the most part, digital allows researchers to engage with their audiences in a way that contributes to a co-generation of new knowledge.

Generally, it allows researchers to share ideas and receive very useful feedback. It lets them go back on their analysis and correct mistakes. Digital tools make it easier to access information which is invaluable for research. As you share information, you access more information, you take that information with you and you go back in your process, you go back in your what I'm going to study first publication, you go back in your tweets, you go back in your Facebook engagements and you can accept that you might have maybe made a mistake, you accept that you might not have had all the information. I think digital allows this. It is a lot more formal, it is a lot more flexible than people expect it to be.

To me, this means that researchers need to be open to criticism. If you are going to put your ideas out there early on and you want to continue through a long term research process, you are going to have to accept that some of these ideas will be criticized. They might be wrong, and you just have to continue, or they might be right so you have to take them up. And this in a way means they must learn to take themselves and their community less seriously. And this might be easier said than done.

Maybe the new generation of researchers will find this easier. They will have grown up using these tools and with a different experiences of privacy. They will know that it is possible to edit a blog post or add a note to clarify an earlier correction. They will know that by asking for help publicly it does not mean that their ideas will be stolen. It might actually be promoted.

And it will be obvious to them that a Tweet with a link to a blog that has a link to a working paper is going to be much more effective that a working paper on its own. This is going to be research communications 101 for them. And we should encourage that; that view of how to engage with your audiences.

Now as a way of concluding this very short talk, I should say that all this has implications on research organizations themselves. The culture of researchers change. The way they engage with their own peers, and their funders and their audiences change. It has to have an effect on the way that research organizations organize themselves.

Changes in the research culture will affect hiring practices, they will hire different types of researchers, different types of communications. The roles and responsibilities of different members of staff will also change. You know we now strive to have a team of researchers, a team of

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communicators and a team of managers. I don't know if this is going to be the case in the near future. It might just be that you will have people who conduct those three roles at the same time. And you might have people who are more or less senior and not depending on whether the researchers belong to central services. But because of the culture and objectives of the organization. Leadership roles are going to change in particular, and therefore governance structures will change as a consequence. You will have different individuals involved in senior management, you would have different individuals involved in the boards of these organizations as well.

Now the research project output changes to reflect this idea of digital first then the research project design will change and the way you manage these projects will change as well. These will have to adapt. This will have consequences on how funding is sought, how it is awarded and how it is managed. And if funding changes, funding models change, inevitably, so will the business models of the research organizations.

So I think it is a fun times ahead, very exciting, very interesting. I hope you enjoyed it. I will share the transcript with you. I have already done it, so you should have it with you if you want it. And if you have any questions, don't hesitate to ask me. I am onthinktanks.org, on Twitter and on the Aura website. Thank you very much.

(1 November, 2015. Length 17:57mins)

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