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Communication between science, policy and the media: lessons for researchers

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ABSTRACT

Based on three decades of personal experience this paper provides suggestions for researchers who consider to have contacts with policy makers, politicians, and the media (PPM actors). The point of departure is that such contacts may be beneficial for researchers and their institutes, as well as for policy making and wider society. The core of the paper is a set of ten recommendations. These recommendations focus on having contacts with PPM actors at all, and if so: under which conditions, discussing the questions to be answered, the importance of core messages, scientific underpinnings of answers, the storyline of answers, the different mindsets of researchers as opposed to PPM actors, avoiding criticizing politicians, the benefits for researchers of having contacts with PPM actors, and proactively contacting PPM actors.

Introduction

Urban transitions need policy interventions influencing other societal actors, like companies, citizens groups and citizens. Such interventions might benefit from scientific research and insights of researchers. However, journal papers are the main output of scientific research, and many journal papers are not even accessible by candidate users because they have no subscription to journals. And even if papers are published open access, they are often difficult to understand by others than researchers. Therefore other forms of communication between scientists and societal partners can be very helpful. But most scientists are not trained or informed about how to deal with such partners. This paper primarily focuses on lessons for researchers in their (candidate) contacts with policy makers and politicians. My point of departure is the assumption of 'independent researchers', implying that the focus is on academics and other researchers that stick to the rules of codes of conduct for independent researchers.

Because not all the insights directly go from researchers to policy makers and politicians, but via the media, the paper also discusses media contacts. From now on I use the abbreviation PPM for politicians, policy makers and the media. With media I refer to traditional media, mainly television, radio, podcasts, and written press (newspapers, magazines, ..., online or hard copy). The specific characteristics of social media, as far as they differ from traditional media, are not in the scope of this paper. The lessons can also be fruitful for researchers who have contacts with other societal partners than PPM, such as interest groups and

companies.

Contacts between researchers and PPM are not only beneficial for PPM and those who follow the media, but also for researchers. Such contacts are a nice way to show the relevance of research for policy and society, and might be good for the reputation of a (part of a) university, or research institute, or independent research in general, and consequently it could be beneficial for research in general if those who pay for research directly or indirectly (ministries and others) see the societal impact of research.

The remaining part of this paper is structured in the form of ten key messages (tips and tricks), followed by a brief discussion. The lessons are all based on about three decades of frequent contacts of me with PPM, and other societal partners. My experience is in the area of transport policy, and most PPM contacts I have had were Dutch PPM, so some bias might exist. The Netherlands has a relatively open culture with respect to contacts between researchers and PPM.

1. Accepting an invitation or not can depend on (a) your personality and knowledge, (b) which PPM actor, (c) when to have contact and (d) which type of meeting/contact

Suppose you as a researcher receive an invitation for a meeting with a PPM actor. Should you accept it? The answer is not a simple 'yes' or 'no'. It first of all depends on the personality of the researcher. I am aware of people who feel really uncomfortable about having contacts with especially politicians and the media because of the risk of being

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misinterpreted, or politicians and the media selectively selecting in all information provided by the researcher, or giving answers that they later on regret. I know of people who had bad experiences themselves and now prefer to not have such contacts anymore. My impression is that researchers are more hesitant to have contacts with the media and politicians than with policy makers. On the other hand I know many researchers who are open to such contacts and have largely positive experiences, and this also applies to me. So if you feel uncomfortable having contacts with PPM, you probably should not accept invitations. Or you can try and evaluate afterwards if it is a good idea to continue having contacts with PPM.

In addition to personality of the researchers, the expertise matters. Some or probably most researchers are specialists. They know a lot about a relatively small topic. Others are more generalists who know the main lines of many (related) topics. My impression is that contacts with PPM are mainly of interest for generalists, because the questions of PPM can easily go beyond the expertise of a specialist. And contacts with PPM are more likely to fit people with some background in evaluation methodologies (assessing the pros and cons of candidate policy interventions) than for those who have not.

To me it is no problem if some researchers do not have PPM contacts, especially if they feel uncomfortable about it. But it is important that at least some researchers are willing to speak to PPM.

Next an important question is if you are knowledgeable about the topic. Maybe you have some expertise on the topic(s) at stake but there are others who are more capable of answering questions of PPM. I regularly advise PPM to contact someone else because s/he is more knowledgeable.

Secondly, it matters which specific PPM actor contacts you. Policy makers generally are quite neutral and I never decline invitations for contacts with policy makers if I can help them. This is different in case of politicians. Especially with populism becoming more common and some politicians now have an anti-scientific attitude (for example, denying climate change), it could be risky to have contacts with them because your information could be misused. And maybe you do not want to support such politicians anyway. Also the risks of contacts with media vary between media. My experiences with most media I had contact have been good, but I also have some experiences that made me more hesitant towards some specific media. This, for example, because they cite me for things I never said, or that were (deliberately) placed out of (important) context. But these are exceptions, about 99 % of the output of media based on interviewing me is more or less OK. In case of written press you generally can make the agreement that you see the draft text and correct if needed. In case of corrections, come with clear alternative formulations that are not much longer than the original text.

Thirdly, especially in case of contacts with politician, a showstopper is often the timing. Politicians generally propose a time and place implying agenda conflicts. Policy makers are generally way more flexible. Most media are also quite inflexible, especially in case of daily news. Radio and television sometimes invite researchers at a specific place like a studio or other location, but if you cannot be present at the preferred time, they are generally willing to come to you. Or, in case of radio, they are willing to interview you via telephone or computer (Teams, Skype, ...).

Fourth, for several researchers the type of meeting matters. This can be a presentation of your research or expertise, an informal meeting with one of a few persons, a telephone call, a more formal meeting and many more. I know researchers who dislike direct broadcasting for radio because they generally want to think about their answers for some time. Some people prefer 'supply driven contacts/meeting', where they tell about what they want to tell. Others are more open for 'demand driven contacts/meetings', which are way more common, in which the PPM actor asks questions. In most cases you can ask and negotiate the questions beforehand.

2. Questions are often only a point of departure, no stalemate (ask for the 'why' behind question)

PPM actors generally have questions. But researchers do not have to be too strict thinking they only have to answer these questions. They can propose other related topics, and sometimes even to reformulate the question to make it more relevant. To illustrate this: January 2013 a TV journalist contacted me because the new high speed trains running on the high speed rail line from Amsterdam to the South turned out to have very serious technical problems. The six trains did cost 120 million Euro and could not be used anymore. The question was: how much money will The Netherlands loose on the trains because of these problems? I answered that I did not have any expertise on legal issues and that the answer depends on the contract. But it should be somewhere between 0 and 120 million Euro, plus the procedural and transaction costs. Then I asked why he was interested. His answer was that he wanted to know the overall costs for Dutch society. My answer was that the maximum train related costs would be 120 million euro, but the losses of using the high speed rail line way less than planned would be way higher: the line was built for about 7 billion euro, and the interest rates of state loans would result in losses between 500 million and 1 billion euro. That became the core message on television.

3. Think about your core messages

In many cases there is time between an invitation and the meeting/contacts. You can then prepare by thinking about your core messages. Write them down in easy to understand language and bring them to the meeting.

A problem for researchers, also for me, is generally that researchers want to add a lot to the main message, such as uncertainties, a range in the outcomes, the importance of explanatory factors, the conditions under which the results were derived etc. For most PPM actors this is too much. Try to formulate in easy language and skip most nuance unless that could lead to serious misinterpretations. The level of detail really depends on the length of the meeting with policy makers or politicians, or the length the item on television or radio, or the length of the (newspaper or other) article.

4. Only tell what you can scientifically underpin, unless you make clear that you cannot

My point of departure with PPM contacts is that I have to be able to underpin everything I say scientifically, unless I make explicit I cannot. For example, if the question is about the societal impacts of a new innovative transport mode, like the hyperloop, and there is no research carried out on the real world implementation of that mode yet, I make explicit that to the best of my knowledge there is no ex post research on this innovative mode yet, and hardly any ex ante research. Based on research on the impact of (to some extent) comparable alternatives in the past (in case of the hyperloop: aircraft, high speed rail) I can give an indication of possible impacts.

5. Reverse storyline: start with main message

Researchers are used to storylines that are the opposite of what PPM actors prefer. Researchers use storylines that often follow the next line of reasoning (a) introduce topic (b) tell what we do (not) know, (c) aim / research questions, (d) explain methodology (and sometimes theoretical assumptions) (e) results, (f) conclusions/limitations/implications. In case of contacts with PPM it is better to use the order of a press release: the title tells the main message, then a short text to explain this message, followed by more text for further explanation. Many answers can best be given briefly. PPM actors will ask for more information if they appreciate this.

6. Policy implications: often more complicated than what you have studied

Research often has a limited scope, like one impact of one development or policy intervention. For example: how much lower is the risk of brain damage for a cyclist if s/he is involved in a collision if s/he wears a helmet compared to not wearing a helmet? This mindset is conceptualized in Fig. 1. Suppose the reduction is 50 %. Is then the implication: policy makers should force cyclists to wear helmets? Not necessarily. A policy maker has, or at least should have another mindset, as conceptualized in Fig. 2. S/he is or should be interested in the questions (a) are there more effects than brain damage only (including costs)?, (b) are there alternative measures for the same aims? and (c) what are the effects of alternative measures?

In case of this example: (a) if the obligation to wear helmets would reduce cycle levels because some people do not want to wear helmets, then the health losses due to less exercise could easily outweigh the positive effects of less impact of collisions (see, for example, [1] or [4]. (b) Maybe a reduction in the speed of motorized traffic to 30 km/h has the same positive effects on cyclists as wearing a helmet. (c) that alternative might also reduce noise levels, improve safety for all road users, not only cyclists, but might lead to longer travel times for motorized traffic. Or (d; not included in Figure 2) maybe an obligation to wear a helmet is not the preferred policy implication, an advice to wear a helmet and campaigns might lead to many people wearing a helmet on a voluntary basis, whereas people who do not want this, can still cycle.

It is understandable that a specific study on the impact of wearing helmets on brain damage did not answer these three questions, but that makes it difficult to formulate policy implications. Answers to questions on the policy implications can then best be answered by telling not only the results of the study but also what more needs to be know so that a well-informed decision can be made.

7. Do not be surprised if policy makers selectively use the information you gave

You will probably give more information during a meeting, interview or other event than a PPM actor is interested in. It could well be that what is the core message for you, is not what a PPM thinks is most important for her/him. Take the example of the cyclists helmet protection above. It could be that your research was about injuries but that you also mentioned that some people will probably reduce cycling because of an obligation to wear helmets. That behavioural change could be what a PPM actor thinks is more important for her/him than the brain damage reduction.

8. Do not criticize others (unless...)

Media and some politicians sometimes try to make you criticize others, especially politicians. My advice is to be very careful. I rarely do this. Politicians can have other preferences than assumed in studies evaluating effects of policies, and that is fine. To give an example: in 2012 the speed limit on some Dutch motorways changed from 120 to 130 km/h. Answering questions of journalists I made estimates of the expected increase in fatalities. And based on estimates of effects on travel times, safety, fuel costs, emissions, and next monetization of such effects I concluded that likely the costs would be higher than the benefits, so that welfare losses could be expected. Some journalists tried to



Fig. 1. the mindset of a researcher; example of the obligation to wear a helmet for cyclists.

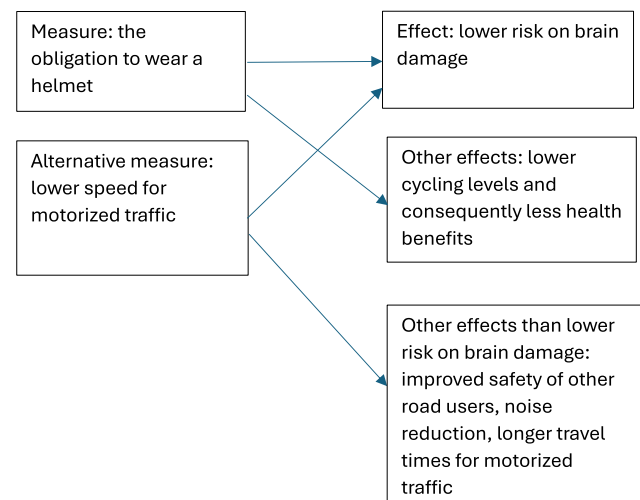


Fig. 2. the (desired) mindset of a policy maker or politician; example of the obligation to wear a helmet for cyclists.

let me say that the policy was anti-social because of the increase in the expected number of fatalities. I refused to do this and explained that policy decisions on maximum speeds should be based on all pros and cons, not on safety effects only. Comparing pros and cons is inevitable. If safety would be the only criterion, policy makers should reduce the maximum speed on motorways to probably about 55–60 km/h because above these speeds fatalities can be expected. So I was not willing to criticise the minister.

9. Contacts with PPM actors can also be fruitful for you, you can learn a lot from the questions they ask

Not only PPM actors benefit from contacts between PPM and researchers. Researchers can also benefit. I learned a lot about policy making and politics based on contacts with politicians and policy makers. For example, people with a legal background cannot deal with uncertainties. A school can or cannot be built at a specific location, considering estimated concentrations of pollutants. The average (or median) value is or is not within the legally acceptable maximum. Notions that even if the average (or median) estimated value is below the maximum, but that there is, for example, a 40 % probability that the actual value will be above this maximum, cannot be used. Legal permission is a yes/no variable. And I learned that policy makers often take a gradual approach with respect to implementing a policy. I learned from an alderman of a Dutch city that her policy to gradually downplay the role of the car, and improving cycling and walking infrastructure, would likely be more successful than proposing to implementing the policy fast throughout the city. A proposal to implement the policy fast would not receive enough political support, she expected. I also learned that scientifically sound indicators that are difficult to communicate are not attractive to policy makers and politicians, because it is difficult for a minister to base her or his policy upon such indicators. For example, the logsum accessibility indicator, an indicator in the family of indicators that express the value of an accessibility level, is considered to be an attractive indicator from a scientific point of view, but is quite difficult to explain [2]. About a decade ago a policy maker responsible for the Dutch policy on accessibility explained to me that any indicator that the minister could not communicate easily is useless. Researchers can then calculate both the values of the logsum indicator, but also some easy to understand indicators, like the number of jobs / schools / hospitals / restaurant / ... that people can reach within a certain time by car, public transport, bike or walking. If the correlations between both indicators for different areas and population groups are high, it is OK to base the policy on the simple indicators because the policy implications will not

be different compared to base policies on the logsum indicator. Kapatsila et al. [3] indeed found in a Canadian study focussing on eight Canadian metropolitan areas that simple cumulative opportunity accessibility measures were strongly correlated to more complex gravity based measures.

10. Sometimes proactively approaching media can help policy making

Almost all contacts between PPM-actors and researchers are the initiative of a PPM-actor. But in some cases a researcher could proactively approach a PPM-actor, for example because there is an important societal debate on a topic. I have done this several times, an example being that I wrote a brief article in a national newspaper about the pros and cons of free public transport. There was a political debate on the topic, and several politicians and others thought free public transport would be a good measure to reduce congestion on motorways, to reduce the environmental impact of cars, and to improve accessibility of people with a low income. I explained that the impact on congestion would be very limited, that the impact on the environment would be around zero and could even be negative (higher emissions) due to the way stronger increase in the use of public transport, compared to the decrease in car use, and that free public transport for all would be a very blunt way to make public transport affordable for people with a low income. It would then be better to make it available for free or less expensive for those people only, preferably only during the off-peak hours. The main reason for the in the eyes of politicians disappointing results is that the overlap in the market for public transport use and car use is limited (see for cross-elasticities [5]).

To conclude: my overarching advice for researchers is to seriously consider contacts with PPM actors if they could add value to society via such contacts. Before having such contacts they could develop their own strategy for such contacts, (partly) based on the recommendations presented in this paper.

For many researchers an overarching question important for the uncertainty about their answers is: how 'correct' or 'certain' does my answer need to be? For me an important criteria is: suppose I would have 'perfect knowledge'. How likely is it that a policy maker or politician would make another choice if she would be 'perfectly informed', compared to the answers I would give? Of course it is not easy to know this likelihood, but an estimated guess can nevertheless be made. If the likelihood is low, for a politician or policy maker it generally is not a problem that you base your answers on 'not-perfect' knowledge.

So far I implicitly assumed PPM actors to be a relatively homogeneous group of actors. But there is heterogeneity. First of all, policy making at the supra-national level (such as the EU), the national, regional and local level differs a lot, and even within the local level there is a lot of heterogeneity – policy making in large cities is not the same as

in small rural towns. Consequently the questions such actors have differ significantly. And because of these difference the questions of policy makers at these spatial levels, and media paying attention to related topics differ a lot. It can well be that the expertise of a researcher is much more on some of these levels than others, and researchers thus can limit their involvement with PPM actors based on their expertise.

Also researchers can differ a lot. For a PhD student it probably is easier to have 'supply driven contacts': they can explain to PPM actors what they have found in their research, and what the relevance could be for PPM actors. More senior researchers can generally deal better with 'demand driven questions' and complex policy relevant topics than less senior researchers. Demand driven questions often touch upon many effects of candidate policy measures, and need insights into multiple, often combined, policy options to deal with a societally relevant topic. Researchers can gradually mature in their contacts with PPM actors, the more senior they become.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Bert van Wee: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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