



NARN Workshop on ‘How to communicate research on Africa’

Nordic Africa Days Conference, Uppsala

23 September, 2016

The Nordic Africa Research Network (NARN) organized a well-attended workshop on ‘How to communicate research on Africa’ during the 2016 Nordic Africa Days conference that was hosted by the Nordic Africa Institute, in Uppsala.

The workshop was moderated by Professor Amanda Hammar from the Centre of African Studies in Copenhagen, and the eminent panel included; Professor Victor Adetula, Research Director, and Henrik Alfredsson, Research Communicator, both from the Nordic Africa Institute, Annika Östman from the Swedish Science Radio, and Nils Resare, investigative reporter and founder of the Blank Spot Project.

Amanda Hammar welcomed participants on behalf of NARN, introduced the four panelists, and then opened the session by emphasising the need for researchers to consider how to become conscious communicators beyond their closest intellectual or professional community. However, it was also important, she noted, to reflect on the question of: ‘what kind of research needs to be communicated, where, for whom and for what purpose’. She indicated the different ways that communicating research might be relevant: for addressing development challenges from an informed basis; for influencing policies from a critical, grounded foundation; for addressing inequalities and various forms of rights abuses; for educating new generations about the complexities and diversities within the African continent; for reshaping the ways in which ‘Africa’ and Africans are spoken about; and for opening the spaces and channels through which Africa speaks about itself.

Victor Adetula, who was the first speaker, informed the audience that Africa is indeed an important issue in the current political and economic discourse, but surprisingly little is known about Africa. He saw the role of academics and intellectuals conducting research on Africa as being knowledge creators with the aim to improve people’s lives. Therefore, communicating research results is important in terms of its potential impacts on policymakers as well as the private sector. Even if researchers may not always be the best people to popularize their own research results, there are professionals who can translate these results in a more accessible language to a wider audience.

Henrik Alfredsson, a former journalist prior to being NAI's Research Communicator, highlighted the difference in how the Natural Sciences and Social Sciences are viewed, with the latter being more open to opinions from a wider audience. He argued that researchers must be aware of the language they use and suggested they try to avoid academic jargon which is not easily understood and can be excluding. He also advised against using "buzzwords" which tend to be vague and could easily be misunderstood. It is better to use concrete examples to illustrate an argument, yet without being too specific. Researchers should try to move from the micro level to the macro, and strive to generalize where possible without being afraid of simplifying the message they are trying to convey to a wider public. He finally touched upon the responsibility and ethics/moral involved. Researchers often have access to sensitive sources and must act according to the ethical and moral obligations in order not to expose the subjects of their research.

Annika Östman who is a journalist for the Swedish Radio, confessed that they focus mainly on the Natural Sciences. But based on the deliberations from the workshop, they will try to include research from the Social Sciences next year. Her section, the Science Radio, has 15 staff member who have to make difficult priorities about what to present to the Swedish audience. The focus in selecting "research news" is on what is "groundbreaking." They read high impact magazines to find their news. In their reports, they look at the conclusions drawn in the research, the methodology used and the debate that is going on in the field to be covered. The challenge for a journalist is to be able to simplify without distorting the research results. On the other hand, they are committed to providing greater depth to the usual news. So for example, in relation to the Ebola epidemic in West Africa, they tried to broaden the horizon and depth of their coverage to the countries concerned, and they continue to report about the issue even when it is no longer a key focus of 'current affairs' reporting.

Nils Resare presented himself as an investigative reporter and a storyteller, with the purpose to have a meaningful impact. Last year he and Martin Shibbye founded the Blank Spot Project, a media project that covers "blank spots", that is, areas which are not covered by ordinary media but where human rights and democracy are at stake. They often invest a great deal in news projects that will become 'long stories', often starting with an intensive period of research, followed by visits to the region. The written reports are disseminated on-line and through the seminars that they organize. They publish in English and have therefore a global audience.

Issues raised in the Q&A session included:

- How can we debunk the many stereotypes about Africa which we see in the media?
- Why are researchers afraid of journalists?
- How can a researcher interact with journalists when they often already have a preconceived 'story' which they want to have confirmed?
- How might one handle the usual suspicion among policymakers towards academics?
- What do we mean by 'policy relevance'? Researchers do not always understand what is policy relevant. Is it always necessary for a researcher to be policy relevant?
- There are bridges between research and policy. One example is EBA (the Swedish Expert Group for Aid Studies).

- Not all research can target everyone. You need to be clear in defining your target group. With whom are researchers communicating? Sometimes it is better to have a small targeted group than a broader audience.
- Researchers produce knowledge on complex issues. How can they make their research more interesting for the public?
- Researchers need to partner with good communicators who are professionals, since a researcher cannot be everything.
- Researchers can use different media and need not only rely on traditional media; for example there are blogs which one can control, or one can write editorials or publish reports. Researchers can also use film and exhibitions to disseminate research results.
- There is a difference between information and communication. Information is the word on paper but communication is when that information has moved into somebody else's brain.

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