



# PANOS LONDON ILLUMINATING VOICES

Journalist Ashok Prasad shows  
film footage to the villagers of  
Dinajpur, Bangladesh. Photo by  
GMB Akash / Panos Pictures

## A journalist's guide to reporting research findings

Promoting dialogue, debate and change

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This practical guide is for journalists and editors passionate about development issues, who see the value of publishing stories based on development research findings. It will also be of interest to communications staff in universities, think tanks, or civil society organisations responsible for promoting research findings. Although there are many advocates of communicating research through the media, there are few practical guides on how to do it well.

Research findings can provide journalists with news stories, news 'pegs', background information, statistics, case studies and expert sources. But research papers are often written in an inaccessible style and poorly promoted.

The Relay programme in Panos London produced a series of news features (the Relay Research Spotlight) in 2010 based on international development research findings. Based on this experience, this guide explains how research findings can be used in articles and offers suggestions for writing successful copy. It also explains some common pitfalls and suggests how to avoid them.

This how-to guide is divided into five sections:

- Using research in your articles
- Finding and interpreting research
- Interviewing researchers
- Writing news articles using research findings
- Top 10 tips for successful articles

## 2 USING RESEARCH IN YOUR ARTICLE

The field of international development is huge; issues can range from HIV and AIDS to peacekeeping efforts to the rights of refugees. Occasionally a research paper is so ground-breaking it attracts media coverage in its own right, if promoted well.

However more often than not, you will need a news or events peg to persuade an editor to include a story related to research findings, however interesting they might be. It is helpful to keep track of global events and meetings such as UN Climate Change Conferences, as research papers relating to the subject are often published before or straight after the event. Following local and world events and finding research which sheds light on a topic of current interest will make the article timely and newsworthy. Examples might include research into food security which can be drawn upon when world food prices are reported. Another way of working out which topic to write about is to look at the UN list of notable dates, such as World AIDS Day: most of these days are related to a development issue, though many editors

will only respond to the biggest dates and may need evidence of a strong story related to less well-known UN days. Remember also that research findings (and interviews with researchers) may add weight or authority to topical stories about complex or long-running issues such as women's rights, debt-relief, humanitarian aid and food security.

Information and Research papers on Development topics:

- Food security: International Food Policy Research Institute, USA has lots of research regarding food security: <http://www.ifpri.org>
- HIV and AIDS: Amfar has a good selection of information and links <http://www.amfar.org>
- Refugee rights: International Refugee Rights Initiative for information on refugee rights and publications: <http://www.refugee-rights.org>
- Climate Change: The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has lots of information and publications on climate change: <http://www.ipcc.ch>

### 3

## FINDING AND INTERPRETING RESEARCH

The internet is a quick and easy way to find great resources on development issues. It's also easy to become overwhelmed. Here are a few suggestions to help find appropriate research.

1. Google scholar: this sub-site of google is a great way of finding research papers. Type in key words or phrases and the desired year in the search field and the search engine will bring up studies that match the criteria. <http://scholar.google.co.uk/schhp?tab=ms>
2. Journals: there are many open source journals such as Journal of International Health and Human rights. A considerable number are not freely available online. One way to avoid paying for online content is to get access to a university library or copyright library as they have access to most of these journals. The Makerere University library in Kampala, Uganda, for example, has access to electronic resources such as online journals. It is worthwhile checking with a local university library whether they have access to journals and finding an academic or student who might help you out. If not, contact the author of the article directly as they will have a copy and are often happy to send one out. Most universities and research institutes list email addresses for their staff on their websites.
3. Newsletters: many research organisations send out regular e-newsletters which include information on newly published and ongoing research. Sign up to them.



#### Useful open source websites:

- Biomed Central - a good website for medical or science research: <http://www.biomedcentral.com>
- Directory of open source journals - contains several journals on social sciences: <http://www.doaj.org>
- List of think tanks and NGOs - NGOs sometimes release research reports so it is a good idea to visit their websites: <http://www.worldpress.org/library/ngo.cfm>
- International Development Research Centre Library (IDRC) have a library of research on their work dating back from 1970: <http://idl-bnc.idrc.ca/dspace/>

#### Subscription journal databases:

- ScienceDirect - a database of journals in most subjects. Often, the journals are not open access: <http://www.sciencedirect.com>
- Web of Knowledge for academic institutes which require passwords to access <http://wok.mimas.ac.uk>
- Partnership in Health Information contain a list of health related research. Some, however, require subscription <http://www.partnershipsinhealthinformation.org.uk/resources/health-info-resources/databases-1>
- Most universities will have a library section on their website where you can find research such as the University of Nairobi, Kenya, where they have a list of journals they contribute to. Some require subscription <http://www.uonbi.ac.ke/node/148>
- PAIS International has a fairly comprehensive list of journals relating to development <http://www.csa.com/factsheets/supplements/pais.php>

Most research published in academic journals has been peer-reviewed. This means that the author's work is subject to the scrutiny of other experts in the same field. Generally, this is the type of research that you want to write about as it has been checked for robustness. Studies published on the websites of research organisations may not have been peer-reviewed. This does not necessarily mean that the study should not be used but it is wise to carry out additional enquiries after reading the paper. This is explored further in the interviewing section. Here are some general tips:

1. Read carefully: it's easy to overlook important details in the research. Look up words or phrases that you do not understand using dictionaries or the internet. If it is still unclear, don't be shy about asking the researcher what you might think are 'stupid' questions. Judging by the experience of writing the Relay research bulletin, most researchers are prepared to take the time to explain more about their findings.
2. Look at the sample size: many researchers carry out interviews with people. A research sample that includes 100 interviews will be stronger than one which only includes 10. Some research will have statistical data that can be quite technical. If this is a vital part of the study, it is imperative to ask the researcher if you don't understand.

3. Ask who funded the research: most studies will have an acknowledgements section. This will often include information on who funded the research. It is important to see who funded the study as it may indicate a level of bias in the research. You can get more information by asking the researcher during your interview.
4. Ask yourself questions: 'what's new about the research?' and 'is it relevant to my audience?' If it's neither newsworthy nor relevant you will have to start the search again.
5. Contact researchers: generally contact details of authors are listed on the research paper. If not, type their name into a search engine and it will often return their contact details such as phone and/or email address. It is advisable to send a preliminary email explaining what you need from the author, permission to ask questions and their availability. Then clearly state when the deadline is, to encourage them to get in touch on time. For example:

Dear X

I work for the Relay programme at Panos. The Relay programme studies the linkages between research, media debate and policy change, and advocates for the media as an essential platform to widely communicate research in order to improve public debate and decision making on development. One of the ways we do this is to write a weekly feature (Relay Research Spotlight) for the website on new research in international development. (see:<http://www.panos.org.uk/?lid=30397>)

I came across your paper and I think it could be a candidate for the Relay Research Spotlight. Would it be possible for me to email you some further questions on the research? My deadline is for the xx, so if you could get in contact before then I would appreciate it.

Many Thanks

6. Follow up with an interview: it is best to speak to the researcher, if possible. A telephone call enables you to have a conversation and ask further questions and clarify areas of confusion. However email may be the quickest way to get answers to questions especially if the researcher is in the field, in a different time zone or short of time.

## 4

## INTERVIEWING RESEARCHERS

Many journalists say they find researchers hard to contact or claim they don't have time to respond to their questions. The experience of producing the Relay Research Spotlight suggested that most researchers are actually very helpful when approached politely. However, some may have little or no media training so questioning them might be harder. Do not be discouraged by this, but simply explain the purpose of the article and explain that you need to communicate using plain language. Keep the questions simple:

- What are your main findings?
- What is new about your research?
- Can you explain your methodology?
- What policy recommendations do your findings suggest?

- Do your findings contradict any views or sources? If so, which ones?
- How is your research meaningful for the ordinary person?

Asking these general questions helps the researcher to focus their answers. Afterwards, ask for clarification about any aspects of the research you found unclear and any other specific questions relating to the study.

## 5

## WRITING NEWS ARTICLES USING RESEARCH FINDINGS

Here are some tips to help write up the feature:

- Hook in your audience: be clear about the focus of your article in the first paragraph. It can be useful to think how you would write a headline for the story in order to identify the most newsworthy aspect of the research. This should be the first line of the article. For example, below is the introduction to a feature on TB in Latin American prisons:

*Macho culture in South American prisons is helping to fuel the spread of tuberculosis (TB) among male inmates, according to researchers. A new study suggests that male inmates are reluctant to tell their cellmates they are ill and fail to seek medical attention in case they appear weak.*

*Macho culture fuels TB spread in prisons* can be found at: <http://www.panos.org.uk/?lid=31889>

- Explain specialist terminology: most readers have limited knowledge of development or scholastic jargon so explain the terms used in the research using simple language. For example, in one Relay spotlight article, it became clear that that author's definition of what constituted a legitimate state needed further explanation:

*"Dr Victor defines a state with high "legitimacy" as one with "a long history of static borders, a common culture and language that make that state's unity and existence less contentious to its residents and neighbours". The motivations behind African peacekeeping contributions* can be found at: <http://www.panos.org.uk/?lid=31775>

- Be selective: research papers often have several points to make. It is impossible to include every point in a 500-word article. It is better to just pick out two or three points and explain these in detail. A Relay Spotlight feature on a report by the Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing network (WIEGO) presented this dilemma. The report was based on case studies from WIEGO's network from around the world. There were several testimonies covering a number of issues affecting informal workers. The article focused on the increasing saturation of the informal economy by new entrants. See *A race to the bottom for the world's poorest* at <http://www.panos.org.uk/?lid=29266>
- Use direct quotes from the researcher: this is important as it gives the researcher a voice and adds colour to the article. For example, one author of a study on how South African border controls are fuelling human smuggling provided informative quotes. Tesfalem Araia explains how the report contradicts commonly held views about undocumented migrants:

*"There is a widely held belief that undocumented migrants are illegal 'border-hoppers' with no bona-fide claim to enter South Africa," says the report's author, Tesfalem Araia, a researcher in the Forced Migration*

*Studies Programme (FMSP) at the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa. But the findings in this report show that many informal border crossers are in fact asylum seekers with seemingly bona-fide claims, or individuals who could claim asylum if they were more informed about refugee policy in South Africa and less intimidated by South African border control practices."*

*Strict border controls fuel human smuggling* can be found at: <http://www.panos.org.uk/?lid=29437>

- Reference other research findings: if the study contradicts other research findings or well-known points of view it is important to include them. Further statistics may be needed to strengthen your article. For example, a Relay Spotlight article on the cost of diabetes care in low and middle income countries used a World Health Organization statistic, not found in the original research:

*According to the World Health Organization (WHO), diabetes accounts for five per cent of global deaths, of which 80 per cent occur in low to middle income countries. The WHO has estimated that the number of people living with diabetes will rise by 50 per cent in next 10 years.*

*Early diabetic deaths due to high cost of treatment* can be found at: <http://www.panos.org.uk/?lid=32027>

## 6 TOP 10 TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL ARTICLES

- Keep a record of research organisations. You can share this growing 'database' with your colleagues
- Keep in touch with researchers: ask them to notify you of their current and future projects
- Sign up to mail-outs from research organisations, especially communication officers who can be good allies.
- Double-check the statistics and other research cited in the study. For example, if the researcher uses someone else's theory or statistics and you want to include them in your article, you must attribute them.
- Be mindful of time zones as this can make a big difference if you have a tight deadline
- Remind researchers of deadlines. This is especially important if you are conducting the interview over email
- Ask the researcher permission to use their contact and job details if used in the article
- Keep a record of your articles so you can see what topics you are doing so that you don't repeat a topic over and over again
- Plan! In other words, make sure there is enough time for the researcher to respond and to write up the feature before the deadline
- Allow yourself to get interested in a topic and develop your expertise!