Summary of the Centre for Urban Health Initiatives' Policy Workshop:

Communicating Research to Publics and Policy Makers

Held at the Vivian and David Campbell Conference Facility,
Munk Centre for International Studies,
University of Toronto

Wednesday March 22, 2006
1:30-4:30 pm

Document prepared by Mona Shahnazari

The Centre for Urban Health Initiatives wishes to thank the Wellesley Central Health Corporation for their sponsorship and contributions to this event.

Table of Contents:

1. Panelists/Moderators ……2

2. Background & Workshop Review ……3

3. Panel Introductions and Presentation Summaries ……3 - 8

i. Judith Maxwell ……..3 - 4
ii. Mike Gasher ……5 - 7
iii. Paul Muldoon ……..……7 - 8

4. Inter-panel Discussion……...……9

5. Discussion Period ……..……...……10 - 12

Panelists:

Judith Maxwell - Founding President and Research Fellow, Canadian Policy Research Networks

Mike Gasher - Associate Professor, Department of Journalism at Concordia University

Paul Muldoon - Executive Director, Canadian Environmental Law Association

Moderators:

John Myles - Principal Investigator, Centre for Urban Health Initiatives
Bob Gardner - Director of Public Policy at the Wellesley Central Health Corporation

BACKGROUND & WORKSHOP OVERVIEW

- The Centre for Urban Health Initiatives (CUHI) and the Wellesley Central Health Corporation (WCHC) established a partnership based on common interests: getting research and ideas into the public domain and into the hands of policy makers; and doing research that would not only be read but that would someday be an influence on public policy.
- The goals of this session are to help academics, researchers, and students figure out what: it means to influence public policy; how research can be consequential in the real world; and how consequential research can be transferred to publics.
- Each speaker was given 20 minutes for their presentation. Following a short break, the speakers were given the opportunity to comment on the other speakers' presentations and afterwards, the floor was opened for discussion.

PANEL INTRODUCTIONS & PRESENTATION SUMMARIES

Judith Maxwell

Introduction

Judith has been one of Canada's leading thinkers, communicators, and policy shapers for many years, having picked up honourary degrees from seven different Canadian universities for her contributions. Judith began as a journalist. She was Director of Policy Studies at the CD Howe Institute, Chair of the Economic Council of Canada, and also set up the Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) which is one of the most influential institutions in Canada in terms of shaping public policy. Judith is a master at bringing strategic players together in the same room, including members of the public, government policy makers, academics, representatives from NGOs. Not only is she a good communicator, but she is also a terrific listener.

Presentation

- Previously, when a speech was made in a major platform, the media would be there, and they would report a summary of what was said. They did not report an interpretation or the adversary's view to it; they simply reported what was being said. So in a sense there was an instant knowledge transfer - if you had some kind of reputation and you had a good podium you could get your message across to the public. I think we have to acknowledge that those are now the good old days. Today, it is rare to get something in a national news media, electronic or print, and this is because the media has changed quite radically.
- At CPRN, we have created a whole new set of channels to transfer research to policy makers. These channels are the internet and face-to-face communication, both of which are an art. CPRN does not itself do academic research, but rather works intensively with academic researchers. The staff at CPRN are knowledge brokers, and serve as an intermediary between the academic and public policy worlds.
- To be effective as an intermediary there are a number of guiding principles:
    - Transparency - every idea generated is available on the CPRN website for free, in an accessible format.
    - Mechanism for systematic access - CPRN's website is a good example; there are search tools and good keywords, but we are also constantly adding to the site. As well, CPRN

sends out a bulletin called eNetworks, which uses around 200 words to put into context the latest piece CPRN is publishing. This provides the opportunity for individuals to pass on the information, to read it themselves, or to not read it all (this can be evaluated through the number of downloads on the site). The mailing list has been built over the years, through face-to-face meetings with various individuals.

- CPRN is an organization that values both formal and informal knowledge. Formal knowledge, which is the highly structured research that comes out of a university, and/or is a synthesis of a lot of different pieces of literature; is combined with informal knowledge, or the experience on the ground of the people who are being studied.
- Learning from one another is an important piece of the puzzle, but creating the dialogue is also essential, and for this to occur you need a diversity of people around the table (a round-table). The researcher and his/her research is brought to a round-table of a representative group of people who may be funders, or who have expressed a strong interest in the topic, and therefore reflect a diversity of views. It is at a round-table where there is that blend of the formal and the informal knowledge; people will criticise the research as being accurate or inaccurate, and they will share their own experience and their own understandings. Based on the discussions, CPRN would then ask the author to work with staff to make revisions to the paper. In other words, the validity of the data collected is tested, but also, we are thinking through what we can actually do with the research, and what it means for public policy. The important thing is that there are policy advisors present at the round-table who are learning about the topic, and that the research begins to influence their thinking (and therefore the advice they give on public policy). They become potential ambassadors for circulating that work and help CPRN to get more people connected with the results. So the act of publishing is the end of a process of knowledge transfer that has taken place. This means that what is finally published is bullet-proof; it has been tested from a lot of different points of view and therefore has a higher chance of success.
- The roundtables are small, (it is suggested that there be no more than 25 people), and the research being discussed may have taken 6 months or even 3 years.
- There are other goals in academic research besides reaching the public (i.e. the need to publish in journals) but if you are really keen to influence policy, you do need to get your work connected to somebody who can provide an intermediary function. This means that it would be beneficial for organizations that have a public policy purpose to have someone on staff dedicated to writing high quality summaries describing the goals of a paper and linking those goals to other findings that have come out of other papers. That person should also ensure that those short summaries are made available on the internet.
- There is a third era that is approaching where in order to post people's interests on a website it is necessary to create a more interactive site, i.e. where we are blogging on a regular basis, adding new material regularly, and having discussion forums where the audience can talk to each other. This is a big hurdle for a non-profit think-tank (like CPRN), because of the associated costs (i.e. software), but also because of redirecting staff's scarce time into the blogs, and as moderators/contributors on the forums.
- I want to stress how important it is to be constantly evolving in this area, in other words, there is no secret formula that I can give that will work for everybody, or that will endure past next year.

Mike Gasher

Introduction:

Mike is a former newspaper reporter and editor, he also has his doctorate in communications. He is currently professor in the Department of Journalism at Concordia University. Among other things, Mike has written a number of textbooks, including recently, Mass Communications in Canada which was published in 2004. Mike's interests closely intersect with one of CUHI's interests: as a member of the Canadian Health and Media Project (a group involved in looking at the way health issues are covered in the media) he works to move the media towards taking the public health approach to dealing with health issues, such as the social conditions that generate good health and healthy populations.

Presentation:

- Mike is a member of the Canadian Health and Media Project, which is a group of researchers, most of whom are based at Simon Fraser University. This group consists of population health experts, communications/journalists, and PhD students. This group is particularly interested in population health and the social determinants of health. Social determinants of health is the concept whereby variables such as education levels, income levels, employment, employment satisfaction, housing, and childhood development (among others) have more impact on Canadians' health than most of the things you read about in the paper, like eating right and doing sit-ups.
- There is frustration on the part of both policy-makers and researchers as to why this issue (of population health) is not taken up in the newspaper. Instead, the classic stories in the newspaper are about the latest discovery that brings us that much closer to a cure for cancer (and even this research is often contextualized).
- Goals of the Project:
  - Determine how the daily newspaper reportage frames a subject as vast as health, given that there many ways to talk about this subject.
  - Look at how this reportage treats scientific knowledge and public policy surrounding health determinants.
- Methods of the Project:
  - Content analysis - what do newspapers cover?
  - Interviews with health reporters - talking to journalists who cover the health beat for various newspapers across Canada
  - Framing analysis of reportage - looking at the stories in a more intensive way in order to determine how precisely they talk about health
- Some of the major questions asked:
  - Where do they get their stories? What are their sources for story ideas and the information that they report?
  - How do they demarcate the health beat? Is it health care? Medical research? Alternative health approaches? etc.
  - What do they know about the social determinants of health? Do they even know what that is? Why do they, or do they not cover health issues from that perspective?
- The purpose of this talk is to discuss a specific interest in a specific piece of research, and what we learned from it in terms of the impediments to getting population health or social

determinants of health reportage in the daily newspapers. The results of the content analysis are not surprising; social determinants of health as a theme in newspaper coverage ranked mostly around things like meditation and alternative methods to health. Most of the coverage in the newspaper has to do with the health care system, or that system which deals with people who are already in need of some kind of medicine or medical intervention.

- Results of the interviews:
  - Health journalists actually do go regularly to the medical and health journals for story ideas, sources and researchers to interview (i.e. New England Journal of Medicine, Nature, Journal of the Canadian Medical Association, etc.). So they are looking for research to report on.
  - Journalists are also manipulated quite often, especially by pharmaceutical companies. The Canada Health Act tightly restricts the kind of advertising one can do, so if you are a pharmaceutical company in Canada, you are very limited. Many of the journalists interviewed found that they were invited to a large number of press conferences, and they commented that they were being used as indirect and free advertising for pharmaceutical products and drugs. This points to how important journalism is as a conduit to the public.
  - Each of the newspapers demarcate health in various ways. For example, the Globe and Mail has four health reporters, including a public health reporter, medical research reporter and investigative reporter. So the beat is framed very differently, but the health care system is nevertheless one of the major frames.
  - Almost without exception, the journalists mentioned some individual behaviour, such as diet, smoking, and alcohol consumption as the major determinant of health, even though they had been told all about the social determinants of health.
  - One of the most interesting findings was the ethical issues raised by reporting on the social determinants of health. In other words, what population health says in a very crude sense is the less income you have and the less education you have, the more likely you are to be unhealthy during your life. So there was a real concern among some of the more thoughtful journalists that covering those kinds of things is very tricky, because there is a danger of stigmatizing the poor.
- There are a number of hurdles in getting research into daily newspapers:
  - Journalism takes the form of a story. It is a narrative form of communication, so it needs the narrative elements, like actors, a setting and a plot. Actors being people who are sick, or who are healthy. A plot, such as how they get there (i.e. good health and poor health), but described in a direct cause-and-effect sense. However, population health is not a simple cause-and-effect area of research; it is very complicated. Daily newspaper journalism doesn't deal very well with complexity, and institutional or social structures, whereas population health is very structural.
  - Related to this, is the concept of populations versus individuals. Part of the journalism storytelling form is to put a human face on the news, and this is very difficult to do with population health; it is hard to translate population health into the kinds of storytelling done in journalims, which prefers monocausality.
  - There is a concern by journalists about stigmatizing those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged, having their stories and the conclusions from those stories misinterpreted.
  - There is a lack of understanding among journalists about what the social determinants of health are.
- What researchers can do in order to get their research to public policy makers or through to the media as intermediaries:

- To better explain to journalists what population health is, and how it can translate into good health.
- To get help from advocacy groups (i.e. childcare advocates, stay-in-school advocates, etc.) so that they are involved, and that they understand the benefits of sharing your research.
- Go directly to the journalists with your work. One of the ways to do this is to work to publish your material yourselves, not only in research journals, but in any of the popular forms that are available. For example, Media (a Canadian journalism magazine based in Toronto) and Le Trente (based in Quebec) are magazines that are always searching for content and would be quite happy to accept well-written and concise submissions from researchers. Also, some newspapers (i.e. The Globe and Mail, La Presse, etc.) have considerable space for op-ed pieces, submissions from experts who do not work for the paper. Another way is to hold workshops with journalists in order to come to a better understanding as to why all research doesn't make it to the popular press. Finally, there is nothing to stop us from emailing specialized journalists copies of our articles. Whether they only read the abstract or conclusion, it can still have some impact.

Paul Muldoon

Introduction:

Paul is the executive director of the Canadian Environmental Law Association (CELA), a member of the advisory commission on the Canadian Environmental Protection Act, and has participated in the review and implementation of this Act since 1994. He has also published articles and books on related topics. One particular feature of his work is that he works at the intersection of actually creating public policy, and dealing with clients and the world of research.

Presentation:

- CELA is a legal aid clinic in the province of Ontario (a portion of funding comes from Legal Aid Ontario), and part of our job is to give legal advice and policy advice to low-income individuals throughout the province. Another part of CELA's work is to represent these individuals in courts and tribunals. They also have a mandate to advocate, so CELA is also a public interest group. CELA has a long history of dealing with the interface between policy and research.
- What is the role of non-governmental groups (NGO)?
  - CELA is an NGO, and therefore also an advocacy group as part of the social movement to protect the environment, but also the social movement connected to essential democratic processes. Environmentalists are so intricately involved with access to information, freedom of information, etc.. because we see this as good decision-making which leads to good environmental protection. We also see the links between low-income and disadvantaged communities and the environment. So basically, we see ourselves as part of the bigger picture. Nevertheless, we do work towards specific objectives, such as changes to policies, laws and by-laws.
  - One criticism faced by CELA is that they are not balanced. In terms of the role of an NGO, part of our job is to advocate, so this is what we do.
- Why is communication so important for NGOs?

    - Research is not an ends, but a means to further the policy objectives of the organization. NGOs generally adore research because research fuels the kind of understanding they want society to have about a problem. Even if an academic comes to me with research that is contrary to our view, most of the time we embrace it. That research will be in the public forum at some point. We therefore need to understand it so we can understand our position on it (whether it can be changed or altered, and whether the study is relevant). Research is a means to a policy end, and is therefore a natural potential for collaboration between the academic and nongovernmental world.
    - Research can also be problematic if the research creates a confirmation of the existing issue and it becomes hard to bring it to the public foray. The media will not want to talk to you if you're going to say what has already been said, but if you have credible research that is against the status quo, you have created a conflict which the media then sees as an important point to report to the Canadian society. The last thing the media wants to see is "I agree" or "its good". Basically, research and science is what leads to good policy.
- It is very important to know your audience. The Canadian society has varied access to information; we either have sectors of society that are well informed on a broad number of issues but not that well informed on each of them, or people who don't have a really broad perspective on a lot of issues, but are really knowledgeable on the ones they do know. There is also a fragmentation and polarization in viewpoints. For example, when we talk about policy solutions, we know that there are large segments of society who believe that the invisible hand of the market is the best way to regulate environmental issues, whereas CELA believes that the invisible hand of policy is not bad either. We don't mind intervening in the market to correct certain things for social benefit, and though easily said, if you go to Ottawa or Queen's Park, this debate is on the tip of virtually every issue.
- Public and policy makers are fundamentally different audiences. The public is more worried about things that affect them on a day-to-day basis as opposed to top-of-the-heart issues (i.e. environment). Top-of-mind and top-of-heart issues are completely different.
- Every issue deserves a different strategy, there isn't a template that you can just use.
- Communication to policy makers:
    - You can reach the public and you can gain their sympathy, but that does not mean it will affect policy. Both at Queen's Park and Ottawa there's a different world where senior bureaucrats and lobbyists are very busy people who simply do not have the resources, capacity or time to understand research. So much of policy is based on a one-page briefing note, and you have to ensure that that one page captures the essence of what you want.
- There are three questions you should always ask yourself:
    - What are the implications of my research? - Unless you can communicate that to the person sitting next to you on the subway, chances are that policy makers won't be able to understand it either.
    - What networks can you take advantage of to highlight those implications? - i.e. the use of knowledge brokers like CPRN
    - How can you translate those implications to affect policy? This is in light of their importance, limitations, and the day-to-day implications of how you and I will live our lives differently because of it.

INTERPANEL DISCUSSION:

Mike Gasher:

There are some pitfalls to wanting to communicate to the public and policy makers, one of which is oversimplification; some things cannot be reduced to a one-page brief. There is a concern that some ideas can get oversimplified in the effort to reach a broader public. As well, people have certain appetites for certain kinds of information, more specifically of critical research or research that can be very threatening to our social values, our belief systems, our standard of living, our lifestyle, etc. Some of the journalists I interviewed found that some of the academic journals play to those appetites, i.e. using very jazzy or whimsical titles to entice a more public readership. These are just some of the things that we need to be careful about.

Judith Maxwell:

Every issue is different; every issue has a different audience and requires different approaches. Both Mike and Paul came up with excellent practices. Mike's advice was that if you're trying to really get the message out, you need to explain how it works, and there are a lot of things that you can do yourself as an academic, (i.e. connecting directly or indirectly with journalists yourselves). Paul's advice was to ask yourself what the implications of your work are, and how you can translate that into daily life. Communication to the public and to policy makers is not completely distinct, but rather interwoven in a way. If you write an op-ed piece, then you are getting the attention of politicians just as much as you are getting the attention of the public. There's a real feedback loop where the public can actually generate pressure on the policy maker as a result of having the knowledge (from the op-ed article).

Paul Muldoon:

Translation of research to policy should not be trivialized. Often things cannot be reduced to one-page, which is why I suggested that you connect with networks that are actually good at bringing together the interface between research and policy. The integrity and credibility of your research should come first and foremost, even if it goes against some of the common views.

QUESTION PERIOD

Statement 1: Public Affairs at the University of Toronto is available to help you communicate your research to publics and policy makers.

Statement 2: What is the role of community in research? When we're doing research we should start with the community, looking at the issues with them, rather than coming in at the end when we have a result, and trying to get the community to buy into our piece. Sometimes our research is not as important for the community. Whatever population you are working with, you have to work with them from the start rather than towards the end. That way the community will feel that they have ownership of the material.

Question 3: What are the roles of researchers and the media with respect to policy implementation (as opposed to policy creation)?

> **Judith:** So much of the public policy process is focused on announcing, but implementation takes a much longer time. It's a much more difficult process for networks like ours (CPRN) to track a policy through to implementation, so we really rely on community researchers to signal back to us that something has gone wrong. They are the people who can bring the less formal knowledge into our understanding of what the policy problem is. It's very important to support community-based research because it's so much closer to the grassroots and therefore you don't have to wait until you've got a big indicator (i.e. dropout rates). Community researchers are the signaling device to others to bring to their attention the problems with implementation, either because the implementation has not happened (which is often the problem) or the implementation has been done in such a way that there is a high level of disadvantage for some people. They also let policy makers know that something doesn't make sense in the real world

Statement 4: Good policy development is based on evidence-based research. Policy recommendations have to be "implementable", if you have the best policy around, but if you haven't got a plan that will play out when the rubber hits the road, then your policy is no good. This is the part where researchers can provide guidance to policy makers on how these things can work. Unfortunately, the implementation part is usually where the ball gets dropped.

Question 5: What is the role of emotion? A lot of research is qualitative and subjective, and has an area of advocacy; is it appropriate or inappropriate to tug on the heartstrings of policy makers? Are you expected to be more objective with the policy makers than you are with the public?

> **Paul:** If it resonates to make good policy, and is based on good evidence-based research, you sometimes do have to use theatre to get to it, but you have to be careful with it.
>
> **Judith:** We can still advocate while staying in the realm of evidence-based research, where you have to get the person you're informing to think about the consequences of not acting. It's even more useful if you have a horrific experience (i.e. Walkerton in the drinking water scandal) to point to, but it's a sad commentary on a policy world, where you have to go through the crisis in order to get a policy. We work hard to advocate for our ideas on the basis of evidence-based research, but you always want to bring up the cost of inaction.

Question 6: How do we get "non-numbers" based research, like community-based research and arts-based research to translate within a system that is based so heavily on counting?

Mike: The public's opinion is more influenced by qualitative methods (like arts-based research) because it makes it so much more relevant.

Judith: Even an academic that doesn't work with qualitative data can end up as your peer-reviewer and debunk some very serious work, and its very painful to see that evidence destroyed. One of the routes that we've used, though not always feasible, is to get some generic data that point in that direction, and put your research within that framework. For example, if you can find some Statistics Canada indicators to reinforce your point, it strengthens the value of your qualitative results in their eyes.

Bob: In many ways community-based research can tell a powerful story in arguing to policy makers. It's just important to speak to the strengths of the research you can offer, and also make sure that the point you're making is clear.

Question 7: Though a powerful tool, what are the limitations of using the media as a proxy to reach out and generate public support?

Mike: Neither the media nor government are a monolith. Mainstream media reporters are speaking to a smaller and older population, and particularly when you go online, it is a gendered, classed and racialized audience. A lot more work needs to be done on other kinds of media. The problem with using mainstream media as a proxy is that they are more receptive to certain ideas and policy instruments than others, and it's pretty clear that some findings will find an audience, and others won't find any.

Judith: Polling deals with top-of-mind issues, and you can't get values or priorities from this process, and yet they are very influential on public policy. CPRN has been operationalizing deliberative dialogue whereby a representative sample of the population sits down for a day to identifying priorities in order to get a much better sense of their core values.

Question 8: How are public views incorporated into policy when there are conflicting opinions from experts? How do you incorporate public opinion that is completely different from expert opinion?

Judith: As a policy maker, you go where there is common ground.

Question 9: Does it really make a difference to have an article on the third page of a major newspaper? What are the better types of media coverage in terms of actually having an impact on public policy? Are there any alternatives?

Mike: There are all kinds of research on the cumulative effects of different campaigns, such as Greenpeace, which has been extremely effective in getting media coverage and delivering a message. They have been able to come up with very creative ways to get media attention (i.e. through stunts). The kind of media attention that does have an effect is one which is consistent with political will or deeply rooted values. For example, any strategy proposing a market solution would get a greater hearing than any strategy that would propose more regulation.

Paul: From a NGO perspective, you try to inform the media, and therefore the public and policy makers, so you want to ensure a continuity of the issue in the media. If you talk to any of the ministers or senior bureaucrats, if there is an issue reported (through a press conference), that automatically triggers a briefing note which will ask 'what is being done?,' 'who are the players on the issue?,' and 'what should the response be?' The media is a very powerful instrument, but it's also one that must be used very carefully, because what is at risk is the credibility of your organization as a voice that should be listened to by policy

makers and the media. There may also be a disconnect between what the public reads in the media, and what the policy makers do, so you target the media to who you want to speak to.

Question 10: What is the link between research and advocacy? How do the media and different organizations deal with that? That is, when do the media go to the advocates and when do they go to the researchers?

Mike: Mainstream journalists/reporters do not want to be seen as advocates, instead they want advocacy to come from the people they interview. So if they are looking for the right-wing view they will interview someone at the Fraser Institute, and for th other end of the issue, they will go to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. Basically, if you're position is consistent with a dominant ideology then you have more of a hearing then if you are more radical or critical.

Question 11: How did you choose the ideal number for the round table? And what is the ideal time length?

Judith: Twenty-five is the right number because you want each person to be able to speak. The sessions usually run for six hours, and part of that time is for lunch and breaks. Because some of the people have traveled from other provinces, they have to feel like it was worth coming and that they had a chance to say what they wanted to; if there are too many people in the room, then there just isn't enough airtime. Sometimes the participants are into the session from the very beginning, but for others it sometimes takes an hour or so.

Question 12: What exactly is deliberative dialogue? It sounds very similar to focus groups and interviews in academic research.

Judith: Deliberative dialogue is qualitatively different from a focus group. There is a lot of background information participants receive that covers all different perspectives on the issue, so they are told what the opponent and the proponent would think. They take charge of the dialogue after a certain point, and as a group, they are in search of some common ground while working though their differences. There is more information on the CPRN website.

Question 13: How do you direct the same issue to different audiences (to the public as opposed to the media)?

Judith: You have to emphasize different pieces of evidence or tell the story differently to a teacher than you would to a government policy maker; you tell the story so it's meaningful to that person or group of people, though you are still using the same evidence base.

Mike: You need to be very clear as to who you want to speak to, and base your efforts on that. The most important question in any kind of research is to ask yourself "so what?", and once you can come up with some good answers to that, the rest can take care of itself, in terms of who you can be speaking to.

Question 14: How can you evaluate whether your policy recommendations are being implemented?

Judith: We do a terrible job of evaluating policy implementation.
