

# Communicating social change in Aotearoa/New Zealand: Connecting research and constituencies

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## **Abstract**

This essay illustrates the complexities of communicating social change, and demonstrates the connections between scholarship and social impact. We examine some of the opportunities and challenges experienced by each of the authors in disseminating the research outcomes of their doctoral research, and how researchers and constituents can together bridge divides between research and advocacy. The research projects outlined in this paper focused on exploring the marginalised voices in debate about genetic modification (GM) and about gated retirement communities in Aotearoa/ New Zealand. Both studies looked at how discourses of the marketplace were used by powerful organisations to construct certain positions as “normal.” We suggest that connections between research outcomes and constituencies are created as a function of the research process itself, and that these connections are both facilitated and inhibited by institutional mechanisms.

**Key Words:** research outcomes, social impact, grassroots dissemination

## **Introduction**

It is commonly understood that the purpose of research is to improve the human condition; that is, enhance individual, group, and societal well-being. It is therefore also commonly understood that the outcome and impacts of any research must be communicated in ways that are accessible to, and understood by, those most affected and likely to benefit. However, aspirations for communicating research and advocating for change may be both facilitated and inhibited by powerful institutional forces within society. In this paper we examine ways in which active participant-audiences responded to the research process and outcomes of our respective

research projects, and identify how institutionalised systems, such as the media, influenced and inhibited dissemination of the respective research.

We believe that the role of scholarship in communicating the social impacts of research does not necessarily rely on formal institutional mechanisms to bridge the divides between researchers and constituencies, research and advocacy, but can also be built from the ground up, in a manner akin to the precepts of action-research. In action research the researcher and research participants jointly identify the problem or issue to be explored. Throughout the process of data collection, they remain in contact, and both have a part to play in discussing the research data, and formulating the eventual conclusions (Cockburn-Wooten & Henderson, 2005; Stringer, 2007).

Our perspective on communicating social impacts comes from separate research projects, which respectively focused on exploring the marginalised voices in debate about genetic modification (GM) and about gated retirement communities in Aotearoa/ New Zealand. Both projects looked at how market discourses were used by powerful organisations to construct certain positions as “normal.”

Alison’s doctoral research (Henderson, 2005) involved comparative case studies (Stake, 2000) of two major primary industries involved in debate about genetic modification between 2001 and 2004. She conducted interviews and focus groups with industry members involved in every stage of production, including researchers, managers, marketers, and the farmers and growers, and examined position statements in speeches, newsletters, media releases and the industries’ submissions made to the Royal Commission on Genetic Modification. Her focus was on how each industry organisation managed multiple identities as they positioned themselves on this controversial issue (Henderson, Weaver & Cheney, 2007).

Mary’s doctoral research (Simpson, 2007) focused on a collective case study (Stake, 2005) involving two major New Zealand Retirement Village Organisations (RVOs) which offered “retirement living,” independent housing and apartments across a range of locations. In addition to interviews and focus groups with employees and village residents respectively, publicly available promotional material from six RVOs operating multiple sites in various New Zealand locations was included. Her thesis explored retirement villages as co-productions between the corporate entities that develop and market villages and the residents who live in them, and had a particular focus on resident participation in the retirement village as organisation (Simpson & Cheney, 2007).

The critical perspective taken in each project revealed voices marginalised by organised, official and corporate communication; for example, representations of retirement village living

were dominated by the perspective of corporate communication, but residents found opportunity for expression of their own views through other routes. One such route was connecting through traditional media, but another route was involvement in the research process itself, which provided opportunities for these marginalised voices and new networks of constituent groups to emerge. In a small nation like Aotearoa/ New Zealand, such networks are relatively easily facilitated both through traditional face-to-face communication and, increasingly, through the use of information communication technologies (ICTs) (Henderson, 2005; Roper, 2002). However, our findings also demonstrated the gate-keeping barriers of both media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and corporate institutions (Deetz, 1992), which can limit both constituent communication and the dissemination of research outcomes. We discuss below these dimensions of connecting research with constituents.

### **Communicating Social Impact**

In claiming that communicating social impacts of research may be built from the ground up, we suggest that the very *act* of doing primary research with diverse constituencies, in the context of social policy issues, facilitates engagement with the issues at the heart of the research, and supports debate about possible policy outcomes.

Significantly, as a result of the interest each of us demonstrated by conducting the research, we became aware of the ways in which our actions empowered other people to take action. This occurred for Alison at the time of data collection, both during her Masters research with citizen groups and during her Doctoral research with dairy farmer and kiwifruit grower groups. The latter groups were marginalised by corporate voices for varying reasons (see Henderson, Cheney, & Weaver, 2007); yet, participants were frequently motivated to find out more and to take a position in a debate that they initially often found too complex: they thought they didn't understand, or that their opinion didn't matter. For Mary, this empowerment came later, following the publication of news stories about her research.

In the case of the retirement sector research, the process of research resulted in engagement with networks of older people throughout the research process. This resulted in continuing interest from a range of constituencies, including support organisations such as Age Concern and older people's action groups, as well as local print and broadcast media, thus sharing the findings of the research and continuing the debate about issues of concern to older people. However, during the period of the research on GM, a clear public policy position was developed by the New Zealand government in an attempt to acknowledge the diverse voices participating in debate about GM issues (Biotechnology Taskforce, 2003). By the time Alison's doctoral research was completed, the debate had become somewhat latent in mainstream media, and spontaneous opportunities to share the results of this specific research project through

media have been less apparent. Interestingly, however, some communication networks established by diverse constituencies during the period that the research was conducted; for example, GE Free, continue to facilitate conversations about GM issues. Others, for example, the Life Sciences Network, were set up specifically to influence the outcome of the Royal Commission on Genetic Modification and have now disbanded.

In the wider social context in which research takes place, we found evidence that barriers to connecting research and constituencies do exist. Even in a small, democratic, community-nation such as Aotearoa/New Zealand, issues of access to spokespersons, documents, and other data; the need for confidentiality; the immovability of specific, entrenched organisational positions; and the organisational “ownership” of certain rationalities impact on research—particularly when key constituencies are highly visible. For example, in the debate about GM, many large industry organisations, such as Fonterra, argued from the “taken-for-granted” or normalised perspective of positivist scientific/technical rationalities, while other interest groups; for example, GE Free, and Maori groups, took more holistic environmental, cultural, or spiritual perspectives on the issues (GE Free, 2001; Greensill, 1999; Jackson, 2001). Within the retirement sector, retirement village organisations (RVOs) tended to privilege security and leisure/lifestyle, as well as their role in providing these, whereas older people themselves focused on independence and opportunities to participate in RVO decision-making beyond the arenas of leisure and social activities.

The gatekeeping by media and corporate institutional forces became apparent in two ways: First, traditional media took particular perspectives on both retirement and GM, and, second, corporate entities associated with the research were less interested in the research findings than grass-roots stake holders, like retirement village residents.

Our experiences with traditional media revealed how dependent we are on our standing and relationships within the mainstream media community as well as the agenda-setting capacities of the media and the extent to which research findings resonate with news brokers. Traditional media provided significant challenges for Alison in communicating the social impacts of the research data. First, media representations of the GM debate tended to identify two highly polarised positions: “for GM” or “anti GM.” Alison’s research examined the *complexity* of industry positions in relation to GM; and this rich detail was hard to represent in media “sound bytes” that included, for example, phrases like “Frankenfoods.” In addition, some activist groups were themselves highly polarised in their positioning, and Alison risked alienating one of the groups she wanted to research if she openly supported *any* one position. For example, interviewing a Life Sciences Network spokesperson prevented her from gaining access to interview the GE Free spokesperson, but a colleague also conducting research related to GM

had a similar experience in reverse—her interview with GE Free prevented access to the Life Sciences Network. Second, much of the media debate involved people with a very high public profile: leaders of political parties and of national organisations. At the time of Alison’s data collection, she was a student without the luxury of a credible academic position as an “expert!” In short, the nuanced position of Alison’s approach to GM research and her lack of status as a student researcher resulted in diverse barriers, both in communicating the social impact of her research and in connecting with significant others.

Interestingly, participant-groups associated with Alison’s research had similar responses from the media. For example, an Organic Farmers Action Group (and a similar group in the kiwifruit industry) successfully facilitated face-to-face contact with other local groups, including at regional council level. They were well regarded by other farmer groups; yet, faced some resistance from traditional media. In another instance, kiwifruit packhouse advisers felt empowered by the research to take a stronger position in the debate and disseminated material through an industry newsletter. However, other locally produced newsletters often had little credibility; the authors were again seen as lacking in official status and expertise, particularly if they took a position contrary to what was perceived as “mainstream.”

Mary, on the other hand, found traditional media, particularly at a local or regional level, to be a successful channel through which to disseminate outcomes of her research. The process began with the almost serendipitous attendance of a University of Waikato media liaison person at Mary’s conference presentation at the Waikato Management School Student Conference (Simpson, 2006). The “everyday-ness” of the issues resonated with the reporter who issued press two releases (October 2006 and July 2007) which resulted in news stories in regional (Southland Times; Waikato Times) and free local (Hamilton This Week) newspapers, a radio interview (Afternoons with Jim Mora, National Radio), and an appearance on regional television (In Depth with Janene Forlong, Central TV). These news articles led to invitations to speak at local community group meetings such as Greypower and Lionesses.

Later in the year an article appeared in the Waikato Management School free publication *re: think* (Who owns this village anyway?, 2007) which is distributed as a twice-yearly “give-away” with regional daily newspapers every quarter. A different, ongoing response ensued. In the month or so after distribution, Mary received email and phone requests for additional copies of the article. As time went by, Mary received phone calls from retirement village residents wanting to talk about the issues raised in the article in relation their own situations. A notable aspect of these enquiries was that they were from individuals seeking support of some kind to address issues similar to those raised in the article. In another development, Mary received a phone call (July 2008) from a retirement village resident to attend a gathering of 60 or so

retirement village residents intent on setting up a national retirement villages residents' association. This was a *collective* response to shared circumstances, to which Mary was invited because the residents thought she “might be interested” in what they were doing.

One point to note here is that differences in the structures of participating organisations may have impacted on research outcomes. On the one hand, participants in Alison's research were organisational managers, other employees, and producers (farmers and growers) from two of the largest primary industry cooperatives in Aotearoa/New Zealand which were *owned* by the producers—the farmers and growers. On the other hand, participants in Mary's research included RVO management executives, village employees, and residents. The owners were the RVOs. Retirement village residents are not considered to be organisational members in the same way that kiwifruit growers and dairy farmers are in their respective industries. Retirement village residents are traditionally positioned as services users and not (co-)producers of the village-as-product (see Simpson & Cheney, 2007).

In this context, “ownership” accorded growers and farmers identities as members of their respective organisations. They therefore collectively consented to the organisation speaking as one voice, even though they often represented diverse groups and perspectives. In contrast, retirement village residents were positioned as individuals, who without a similar sense of connection with the formal organisation could legitimately and visibly *resist* any RVO positions. These key differences may account for the greater media and sector-stakeholder interest in Mary's research outcomes. Media presented alternative positions offered by Mary's research and afforded residents the opportunity to express alternative identities within emerging community networks.

The second arena of institutional response concerns the participant corporate entities associated with the research. In both cases, the organisations appear *not* to have taken an active interest in the research findings.

Alison offered from the outset of her research project to present her findings to each industry organisation, but this offer was never taken up once the research was completed. She continues to inform contacts in the kiwifruit industry about ongoing publications resulting from her research, with a personal interest expressed by one of the original participants but no encouragement to present her findings more widely to the industry organisation. Similarly, after successfully defending her thesis, Mary contacted several representatives of the participating RVOs and offered to send copies of journal articles and to give presentations on her research if they wished. All replied saying they welcomed the opportunity to read published journal articles, but there were no further developments. One aspect to consider is that *lack of feedback* to the researcher does not mean *lack of impact* of the research on participating organisations.

However, if we take the view that our respective research projects aimed to hear marginalised voices, then it is hardly surprising that dominant organisational voices are silent at this point. In this respect silence may be seen as a form of “discursive closure” (Deetz, 1992) that prevents open discussion of contested issues.

## **Discussion**

The primary reason for undertaking research is to benefit those taking part as well as wider society generally, and connecting constituencies with research is fundamental to achieving this. The experiences we have outlined here alert us to the challenges, barriers, and opportunities we need to take account of in research design and implementation, if we are to communicate our research with constituents as well as within the academy. This, we suggest, requires a degree of reflexivity rather than simply reflection (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). To be reflexive is to be able to stand back from the research and see its limits, what it is not saying, and how it is bound by particular constraints. Whereas reflection is a fairly linear process that involves paying attention to the context, language, paradigms, and local research community as we conduct our research, reflexivity involves multi-dimensional, interactive, and mutually informing levels of research, and considers the interactions between methods and levels of interpretation as well as the impact of these methods and levels themselves.

In the first instance as researchers we can think about alternative routes for disseminating research outcomes, take advantage of existing networks, and support the work of existing activists: for example, networks such as GE Free. This may not work during the research; as Alison’s experience demonstrated, taking a particular activist position may have to wait until after the research is complete. However, the comprehensive coordination of multiple interest groups and the sharing of information and action is another possibility for groups to actively resist the dominant order (for examples see Henderson, 2005; Roper, 2002). This was attempted, for instance, at an International Communication Association Pre-conference (May 2008) we attended, which explored the ways in which researchers can bridge “scholar-activist divides” including networking through online communities.

Another strategy is to develop research questions that take into account a social change agenda which includes active collaboration, information sharing and data collection—an “action research” orientation (Stringer, 2007). This requires researchers to account for ways in which the research process may impact on voices that represent issues and those voices which are less organised or marginalised. Negotiating ways in which researcher and participants actively work together in discussing the research data and formulating the eventual conclusions can be an effective means of actively connecting research with constituencies. Researchers and

constituents thus together co-construct knowledge and dissemination occurs as part of the research process (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000).

Finally, researchers need to work reflexively with the changing nature of identity building (see Castells, 1997). Social actors no longer seek identity through legitimating social institutions, but also derive identity through resistance and social movements. Thus voices marginalised by powerful institutional forces will find new routes through interest-based, organic and dynamic networks and groupings. Although corporate organisations may be able to ignore or marginalise less powerful voices within their domain of activity, researchers, especially those working from a critical perspective, need to connect reflexively with these very same voices if their research is to effectively represent the rich diversity of potential data, and reap the benefits of dialogue with wide audiences. Researchers cannot expect their work to be automatically accepted by all stakeholders, but by engaging with multiple constituents, we suggest that research findings may more successfully facilitate new understandings.

## **Conclusion**

Facilitating activism at local grassroots levels is important at times of high profile debate when it is difficult to have a voice in traditional media. In Aotearoa/ New Zealand, moving research findings out of the academy and into the hands of those “less organised voices” can be initiated at a grass-roots level through facilitating participants’ active engagement in the research process, by finding alternative routes for disseminating results, and by connecting with wider groups of constituents. In each case, our research findings demonstrate that such informal engagement with advocacy and policy groups can have social impacts beyond initial expectations. However, they also demonstrate the need to build relationships with both traditional media and corporate organisations to resist the possible institutional capture of the public sphere. We need to reflexively identify and take account of alternative communication opportunities when planning and carrying out our research if we are to connect effectively with our constituencies.

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