Storylines as an alternative method to communicate river research via a knowledge platform

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Sustainable river management relies on diverse and multi-faceted knowledge from fundamental and applied research. Communicating the context, added value and potential use of river research to actors working in multiple disciplines or organizations is challenging. RiverCare is a research programme studying the mid-term effects of innovative river interventions in the Netherlands. Effective communication between researchers and potential users of scientific information, such as water professionals, requires an interactive, two-way communication approach. As part of the communication strategy, we are designing a knowledge platform to provide access to, explain and gather feedback about the potential use of results from water professionals. The knowledge platform is a combination of online services including: a content management system in which storylines are the main component; a data repository to the underlying research data and; hyperlinks to existing online sites that present our results via short news articles.

Storylines engage water professionals via experiences or stories of river management actors to explain research outputs instead of or in addition to more technical means such as scientific papers and reports. The use of storylines enables us to explain research outcomes in a way that is captivating and easily understood by a multi-disciplinary audience. To explore its usefulness as communication approach, we developed a storyline example for research about stakeholder perceptions of a re-landscaping intervention in the Waal river in the Netherlands. The storyline's layout consisted of a menu outline and three tabs: (1) storyline's content; (2) contact details; and (3) links to available resources or related publications. The storyline's content was divided in four sections including subsections to navigate. Each section had a heading statement or question to engage users: "Imagine this!"; "What matters? Places matter to people"; "Surveying people's perceptions"; and "How these insight help us?". Along the story, users can explore related links and available results presented in the form of interactive quotes and charts.

The storyline example was discussed in a workshop with potential users to identify needs for improvement. Participants acknowledged its potential usefulness for water professionals abroad; applicability to other research topics; and options to provide contact details. Participants also appreciated the nice layout and interactive elements, such as interactive quotes and charts. However, more emphasis should be given on explaining why the research was done and how the results can be useful for the users. The added value of storylines and the navigation along the example was not always clear to water professionals and researchers and should be clarified. As presented in this study, the storyline example was a stand-alone component in a browser. To improve the user interaction, next storyline prototypes will be embedded into the knowledge platform to clarify its navigation and to link the specific example as part of the research outcomes of the RiverCare project. Future storyline prototypes will also include a feedback form to collect comments from water professionals and a glossary of terms to further clarify terms that were simplified in the storyline example.