

How to improve research communication in transnational projects

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Key words: dissemination tools, research impact, social media, CORE Organic

Abstract

A continuous dissemination process during the lifetime of a research project is important. However, it remains a challenge for many research consortia as dissemination of intermediate results might have negative consequences for publishing in peer-reviewed journals. Based on an analysis of the dissemination output of eight European research projects, we provide recommendations to researchers on dissemination tools and channels to ensure a continuous knowledge exchange and information flow. We also propose additional criteria to be considered by funding bodies when selecting and evaluating research proposals.

Introduction

Good research dissemination must define exploitable results, produce suitable dissemination tools and select the best dissemination channels in order to bring the key messages to the target groups.

Publications in peer-reviewed journals and other forms of written documents such as articles in popular journals or technical leaflets are traditionally the most frequently selected tools and channels for research dissemination (Poulsen 2010). Because consolidated research results are usually only available at the end of a research project, continuous dissemination activities during the lifetime of a project are not always ensured. We argue that new media, including blogs, YouTube videos, Facebook and Twitter, can help to create an arena for a potential target audience, raising awareness of the research project and assuring a continuous information flow.

The aim of this paper is to provide recommendations to researchers on how to improve the dissemination of their research. Furthermore we propose additional criteria for funding bodies to consider in call announcements and when selecting and evaluating research proposals.

Methods and materials

The recommendations made in this paper are based on a desk study that analysed the dissemination output of eight European research projects carried out under ERA-Net CORE Organic I (Coordination of European Transnational Research in Organic Food and Farming) between 2008 and 2011 (Alföldi and Weidmann 2013). Furthermore, this paper builds on the authors' expertise in research dissemination.

Results

The main results of the dissemination activities of the eight research projects carried out under CORE Organic I can be summarized as follows:

The dissemination plans in the analysed project proposals are all quite similar and standardized. Some consortia try to remain rather vague in order not to "promise" too many dissemination activities, and others present a well-formulated dissemination plan in order to improve their success rate.

The target groups were similar in all projects: farmers, advisors, researchers, and general public/consumers. Based on the number of scientific papers and participation in scientific conferences, all projects have reached the target group of researchers. Farmers, advisors and marketers respectively were partly reached if a project followed a participatory research approach, presented its results at relevant events such as BioFach or produced targeted dissemination material.

The dissemination output consisted mainly of written information, especially scientific articles, workshops and participation in scientific conferences. Compared to the number of scientific publications the number of articles in farmers' magazines was rather low. Not all projects produced popular articles in the national language of the partner countries. Five projects summarized their results in a technical leaflet or handbook.

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Additional tools such as press releases or newsletters were used only by some projects. None of the projects included social media or audio-visual tools. Most projects showed a clear potential for improvement.

Recommendations for research consortia

Just as research activities, dissemination activities have to be planned during the development of the research proposal. Ideally, this process will include stakeholders and start as soon as an outline of the planned research is available. This will help to improve the relevance of a research project. The European Commission (2012) provides useful information on how to develop a communication strategy for transnational projects.

Dissemination activities are usually concentrated at the beginning and at the end of a project. For most consortia, continuous dissemination remains a challenge. Researchers in general do not like to disseminate intermediate results because this might have negative consequences for publishing in peer-reviewed scientific journals. However, communication experts underline the importance of a continuous dissemination process during the entire lifetime of a project. The following dissemination tools and channels are discussed in relation to the improvement of continuous knowledge exchange and information flow.

Newsletters are recommended if a consortium already has well-established relations to a target group. The information is directly addressed to the target group and the information collected within the consortium can be used for further planning of dissemination activities. However, newsletters require time for editing and for collecting e-mail addresses, and they might reach only a very limited number of recipients.

Social media platforms like Facebook or YouTube as dissemination channels for a research project are still seen with scepticism by many researchers. Arguments against setting up a Facebook profile are: too time-consuming, too distractive or privacy problems. Here are some arguments for the use of Facebook (FB) as a dissemination tool: (i) unlike other social media platforms, FB is the most widespread and target groups like farmers, marketers or politicians are more likely to find you on FB; (ii) enterprises and universities are using FB, so why not research groups; (iii) FB allows you to build up a community of potential target groups; (iv) by posting photographs of activities in the field, your FB visitors are able to look “behind the scenes” of your project; (v) on FB, you maintain awareness of your project by providing insight into the on-going research and development activities and (vi) you can get feedback from your FB visitors.

Although there are few concrete examples, we are convinced that FB will be a suitable channel for projects with a practical and participatory approach.

Twitter is a suitable tool to specifically communicate with peer institutions. Many research institutions worldwide are present on this social media channel. Compared to FB, Twitter has a more professional image in the online communities. Twitter allows you to follow the most important institutions and persons without their agreement. On your timeline you can assemble a steady flow of information with an academic focus.

In contrast to FB, Twitter has a limited space of 140 characters per tweet. That means that there is hardly any space for unnecessary chatting, and there is almost always the need to have the full information in another place on the internet. You have to come to the point quickly and formulate your message in short words, often combined with a link to the project website with the extended version, or the respective paper or media release. Like FB, Twitter allows the upload of photos. Twitter is a perfect tool for high-speed on-the-spot dissemination of news from the scientific world.

Online videos are a powerful tool to provide insight into on-going research activities and to underline the relevance of research by providing practitioners a platform containing testimonials. Online videos may also be useful in areas of science where records of complex laboratory demonstrations, science documentaries or academic lectures might more effectively communicate scientific experiences than would prose (Kousha *et al.* 2012). Consortia can either hire professional video producers or produce a video on their own. According to Raven (2012), two qualities must be found in any good video: a steady camera shot by using a tripod and a clear, crisp audio by using a wireless external microphone. With today's consumer equipment and editing programs for online videos, non-professional filmmakers are able to produce high quality videos. However they should have some basic training and consider the following recommendations: (i) keep your video short (2 to 5 minutes); (ii) prepare a story board including key messages; (iii) carefully select the people for interviewing, let them speak freely, but concisely; (iv) use a voice-over speaker if relevant messages need to be added and (v) add additional visual elements such as photographs and graphs.

It can be concluded that a coordinated mix of dissemination tools and channels (website, print, social media, media releases, direct communication and demonstration) will create the strongest impact. Furthermore, the

impact of research results can be improved if dissemination material is co-produced and supported by organizations of the target groups such as organic farmers' associations or advisory services. Research output should flow into well-established media such as knowledge platforms, wikis or well-known series of technical guides or handbooks in order to achieve a sustained impact.

Recommendations for funding bodies

In the evaluation of proposals, a strong focus is set on scientific innovation, research methodology, and the consortiums' expertise. Dissemination needs specific skills and expertise. Just as for scientific expertise, dissemination expertise should be evaluated accordingly.

To improve the success rate of their proposals, consortia often maximize the amount of research conducted at the expense of the dissemination activities. As a consequence, resources for strong dissemination are often missing at the end of such projects. Therefore it is recommended that expertise in dissemination should be clearly demonstrated, and enough funds should be allocated for this purpose.

Funding bodies can improve the frame conditions for dissemination in the call description and the evaluation of proposals. The requirements for improved dissemination should be included in the guideline for applicants. Proposals should include a dissemination plan describing: (i) the target groups including their knowledge and dissemination needs; (ii) the relations of the project consortia with the target groups; (iii) how the exchange of opinions and data as well as of knowledge with the stakeholders will be organized during the research process and after completion of a project; (iv) the channels and tools to bring key messages to the target groups; (v) how a continuous dissemination flow during the project is ensured; (vi) how dissemination will be organized within the consortium; (vii) that enough funds and resources are allocated to the planned dissemination activities and (viii) the indicators by which the success of the dissemination activities will be measured (e.g. website visitors, numbers of press releases sent out, number of technical guides printed and distributed).

Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge funding from the European Commission under the 7th Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development for the ERA-Net Project CORE Organic II (Project no 249667). This article does not necessarily reflect the Commission's views and in no way anticipates the Commission's future policy in this area. The text is the sole responsibility of the authors.

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