



Seismic Shift: Metrics, Media and Marketing and the changing world of journals

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Using Research to Influence Policy: The Think Tank Perspective

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TRANSCRIPT

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[START] Thanks so much for the invitation to speak here. We have had some really good presentations so far; I hope that I can perhaps cover some of the same ground and get a different perspective. To explain what RUSI is, the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies is a think tank that was founded in 1831 by the Duke of Wellington, so you could perhaps give us an establishment label, but nevertheless we exist to promote the public debate on issues of security both to the UK, but also more widely across the globe. We also work on a mass of issues ranging from Defence Procurement, buying carriers, all the way through to security in at-risk parts of the world.

My presentation is briefly going to explain what impact means for us - a think tank that worries about what policy makers are thinking and doing - and how we try to achieve this impact, perhaps maybe we're emphasising the value of traditional methods alongside the new tools, and then how social media of course fits into our activities.

I thought we'd begin with a little witticism by J.M. Keynes, who I think does touch on a rather important point - that impact can come in many different forms. What I think Keynes is getting at when he talks about the influence of academic scribblers is a notion that one can be influenced by an argument without necessarily realising it, and I think in this it means

that there are many ways of being considered influential. We've talked all about metrics and citation impact earlier, but I think there are other ways in which we can shape a debate where you determine what is considered politically feasible, and for us that's a very important part of what we do. It can be, in part, shaping one small critical aspect of policy, for example what kind of deck arrangement an aircraft carrier should have, or it can be tilting an entire national debate, should we intervene in Syria or not? Consequently I think while at RUSI while we won't shake anyone's world-view, what we can do as a think tank, is improve the quality of public parliamentary and policy debate, and that's what I'm going to talk about now.

So, who are we trying to reach? Perhaps a slightly different audience to that of a lot of people in this room, perhaps people who are more concerned with reaching other scholars. Who we worry about range from cabinet ministers to select committees, all the way down to the public, so, as we call them, the educated laymen, those who have got a bit of an interest in defence and security, but perhaps who couldn't tell you the difference between STOVL and VTOL.

It's important to remember that different arms of the policy world do different things, which affects what they need from us, and this is something that I'm going to start stressing in my presentation, the fact that we need to work on tailoring our output for those who are going to consume it. So for example, select committees are about scrutinising policy rather than generating it, so how you would feed into them is through things like concise written evidence and briefing papers that perhaps comment on what the government is doing. Another practical example is when we, for example, would have a publication on how the military has to deal with a very niche topic like cultural sensitivity in counter-insurgency operations. We would tailor that literally for the mid-ranking and senior officers who perhaps work on doctrine or in the field. I've actually got pictures of officers reading the *RUSI Journal* in the middle of Afghanistan. Therefore you are tailoring it for them, which affects the language and it affects the format; it's got to be short and concise and you've got to speak their language to some degree, but also have it accessible to a wider possible audience. You're not pitching it to the Permanent Under-Secretary of the MOD, or there'd be a very different set of requirements.

So what is policy impact for us? Well I've got a, sort of, brief and very true spectrum here. At the top you have what insider think tanks can do, which is essentially to generate policy from scratch, and often this happens with a party political affiliated think tank when they're out of power (and the government thinks they're going to get in) they start working on policies to be introduced in government. We work more on kind of the middle two levels where it's feeding into existing policy processes. So for example, RUSI's doing a lot of work on the next defence review right now, but also scrutinizing policy and influencing elite debate, and this again affects what kind of output we need. If you're generating the policy

you probably want a very long, very detailed report. You need to be very clear what the methodology is and so on. If you're getting into scrutinising policy and influencing elite and public debate, you probably need a lot more accessible publications that have to go out to a wider audience and have to be written in a much more easy style, yet at the same time you have to maintain the rigour that marks your research as a quality product. So, these aren't mutually exclusive, but it's always useful to think of what you're trying to do. So, the first method we use, and it's a very traditional one, is to use our reputation as an institute that's been around for a long time to get into key policy-making circles. So as we say, it's the PDF that gets circulated around the FCAU, Middle East Desk or the Asia Desk, and someone says "this is really good, read it". Or it's the copy of the *RUSI Journal* that lands on the coffee table of the Ministry of Defence or David Cameron himself. So we're beginning to select our audience. The reason we can do this is because we're quite well connected; we know who the key decision makers are and we know how to get to him or her. Also because of our ability to keep our ear to the ground and kind of pick-up currents before they're publicly known as to what the government thinks the next question is, we know what they want. So before an attack in Nairobi on a mall we were discussing mass event security and Mumbai – style attacks as a key element of what government should be thinking about. When you do this you've still to balance rhythm and concision; it is important to remember that you're up against vested interests and a lack of time. If you're trying to influence policy what you're doing is inherently political, and you're also up against bureaucratic inertia. The way your research may suggest something is done may not be how civil servants have been doing things for ages and (how they) want to do things. So essentially there's a warning that conclusions can be off-message and so one should be prepared for political pushback. My favourite is when the MOD responds to one of our publications by the classic phrase "your findings are interesting but they are nevertheless out of date". On the other hand, we also have a role of influence in public debate and we are getting more into the reach of social media.

Basically, you need to have publications that are easy for the public to access and also easy for the public to understand. And again, it's about tailoring the product. If you have an 8,000 word research paper replete with endnotes and jargon, it could get picked up, but it won't achieve the mass reach you're looking for. So this why multimedia is important. I think a key theme that we've been discussing today, which is very hard for me to see, is recognition of this importance. One needs pithy, yet informative, abstracts to lure the reader in; infographics are also important, along with other forms of data visualisation. There is so much that can be done with data visualisation now which can translate very complicated numbers into something intuitive and actually quite fun to look at. *The Guardian* does this really well I find. And again, we have to think about ease of access. How do our documents look on a mobile device, because that's how a lot of people read stuff these days, as I'm sure

you're all aware. How many of you have tablet computers here? I thought there'd be more, but that's still a sizeable chunk.

Finally, distribution is also key and this is where social media really starts to come in. On the one hand we have the power of social media for reaching people who have probably never heard of RUSI. We're quite a niche think tank; your average Joe on the street may have heard of Chatham House, one of our competitors, but they certainly wouldn't have heard of us. Nevertheless, through social media you can target key notes, those four or five people in your network who've got 10,000 followers each mean you can start harnessing the network effect - . So those 10,000 tweet to another, within that network of 10,000 a few of those tweet to another 3,000, and so on. But, on the other hand, don't forget the power of traditional media. I think what I want to stress in my next slide is that social media is one tool amongst many.

Media, old media, as it were, are still trusted brands and we consider it to be a great success, the key measure of impact, if we get into *The Guardian* or *The Telegraph*. When you're preparing the press release remember that journalists love bite-size conclusions and they love numbers. Investing in a good Press Officer is a recommendation. And again, to reiterate what's been said earlier, don't forget blogs. You can highlight key findings in a clear simple style and reach readers you otherwise wouldn't get to, and you can do this in a combination of institutional blogs, but also author blogs. To reiterate the previous presentation, building good relationships with authors and getting them to co-ordinate their social media activity with yours can give you a much wider effect. And the best thing about blogs is that you can make them free to access. On the one hand you can disseminate aggressively, but on the other hand perhaps protect revenue streams, which are still important.

Part of the problem is, especially with public debate, you can lose control of your message. You can't control how it's going to be interpreted. I think we're all familiar, in this room, with examples of articles that say one thing, but this is then slightly skewed in the telling in the mass media. I think one of our great moments at RUSI, for example, was when we had the Taliban reference one of our briefing papers, saying that peace talks in Afghanistan were possible. We had a very very, angry statement from the Taliban being whipped around social media network saying "The Royal United Services Institute was a pack of lies, these talks never happened". We also had an instance where a Right-Wing group called up one of our editors to congratulate us on publishing this really hard-hitting article that said what they'd been saying for years of course, it didn't, but it was the way a certain paper presented the view.

So, what are the opportunities? I think, to analyse how RUSI is at social media, we have 14,000 Twitter followers, many of whom are experts in the field, but also students and interested people in the public, and we have 11,000 Facebook 'likes'. To briefly talk about how we disseminate our output and engage with our audience, we find these are both key

activities for social media. The way we do it is slightly different between our institutional accounts and our author accounts.

With our institutional accounts, we find the broadcast mechanism is what's most useful. Saying "here's what RUSI is doing, come to our events, read our publications". If someone, maybe a key expert in the field with 30,000 followers, says he's just written a paper on this we may engage with them and say "RUSI's also done this". But, if I say "engagement is important", why don't we do that with our institutional accounts? We find it's not really the appropriate format. To say, "you're talking to RUSI...", I think people are aware that you're talking to the guy who does social media, not necessarily talking to the Head of Research or the Director General, or, one of our Senior Associate Fellows. That's why individual accounts are so important, because a key part of engagement, for us, is having a genuine personal link between the person who is perhaps on our end, and, the person who, in the public, or the outside expert who wants to talk to us. Many of these people are recognised voices in the defence debate, so for example, this also gives us the advantage that when they appear on *The Today Programme* or *Newsnight*, or some other media programme, that a clued-up outlet can then mention them in a tweet and say "Professor Michael Clarke is speaking on X tonight at 9". The discussion starts well before the show, and that's possible with a personal account, not so much with an institutional account. I hope I've given you a slightly different perspective on how we use it.

This is not the only model, of course, but it's one we find works well for us, and I think that's a key part of social media; it's an experiment in finding something that works for you. But for all the hype, perhaps maybe we can briefly consider the limitations of social media as a tool.

The internet can be a bit of an echo chamber and it can be pretty hard, we find, to build up a following outside of your expert community. Furthermore, don't forget much of the power of social media is about the consumer choosing what to share. You can't really shape this, as the producer. This is unlike with traditional media where if you've got a good line into a journalist you can sometimes push material a bit more into the broadsheets, than perhaps with the potentially more powerful, but equally potentially harsher, and more callous department of social media. This links to the point that in social media, and the internet as a whole, the signal to noise ratio is very low and actually that's why branding is so important, because you need to stick out. When someone sees your logo on the tweet, on the little sidebar, they say "ah, that's something by RUSI, or that's something by IISS, I'm going to look at that or give it a second of my time". Instead of, as often happens, where you just scroll past – and, again, the brand is something you can build up with engagement.

Finally, one real problem in all of this is the fact that doing it really well is extremely time-consuming. And I'm sure we're all very busy people here and perhaps not everyone has access to a dedicated social media consultant or officer in their institution. We're lucky that

we do. But to build up a social media brand takes a consistent investment of time and effort. You need to be on Twitter all the time, monitoring what's going on; you need to try and be there when America wakes up, if you're an international player, because a huge part of your audience is over there.

Finally, a word regarding your reach... Social media is great for influencing public debate because you can engage and you can mobilise. So, particularly if you're straining to more of the advocacy type of role. Look at what NGOs in the UK were able to do with the Arms Trade Treaty Campaign - it was fascinating and it was brilliant. You know, they really mobilised the broad base of support to get a treaty on the Arms Trade passed in the UN General Assembly. That's not so much what we do. We're more about presenting options and saying "take your pick". But policy makers are often very busy, and the problem with social media is that you're up against many excellent reports being released all the time; there's so much there. So, for what we do, at the end of the day, for that direct policy reach, we find some of the old tools still work really well.

Anyway, I hope I have perhaps provoked a few questions. I'm really happy to discuss this in, hopefully, the Q&A section now. Thanks for your attention. [FINISH]