FAQ 42: How can I ensure my findings are not misunderstood?

What's the issue?

It is, of course, very difficult to ensure that findings are not misunderstood. There is not much danger of this happening, however, when communicating with other researchers as the scientific community has standard procedures for evaluating research findings. The aim of scientific reporting is to inform other researchers and the general public of the research findings and also of their trustworthiness. It is first and foremost when communicating results to the general public that things may go wrong.

Common practice

It has perhaps never been so easy to publish material both in print and electronic form, but at the same time it is increasingly difficult to be heard in the ever growing chorus calling for attention in the public sphere (McNair, 2006). It is, however, possible to take various steps to improve the likelihood that your messages are heard and also that what you say is not misinterpreted. If a report is made, some basic rules of thumb apply:

- Try to be clear and concise when presenting results – do not leave it to readers to draw their own conclusions.
- Remember that numbers do not speak for themselves – try to put things into perspective as much as possible.
- Try to avoid technical terms when writing summaries and main conclusions.
- Use graphics, if possible.

Questions to consider

When communicating with the news media the following should also be kept in mind:

- Who is the audience for the report? Academic, researchers, non-governmental organizations, children, parents.... Depending on the target audience, the idiom will differ.
- Ask yourself what is newsworthy about the findings and how is it possible to connect the findings to the wider social context. By sharpening the focus of the story before contacting the media you increase the likelihood that it will be reported at all, and also that it will be reported in the way that you want it to be.
- Ask yourself who is likely to be interested in the findings and why. This will enable you to focus the findings more directly at the target group.
- Choose the appropriate media for the findings you wish to present. Once it has been established what the message is and to whom it should be directed, the next issue is who should deliver it. Television is different from a broadsheet paper, which in turn is different from a tabloid paper, and so on.
- Consider the practices at the media outlet and plan when to contact the reporters or editors so that they will have the time to get to know your story without being under too much pressure from their next deadline.
- Provide reporters with a written memo or press release containing the most important information. Such a memo needs to clarify the main points and begin with the most outstanding ones.
- Provide the media with access to a contact person who can give further information or participate in an interview. Also provide a quotation in the memo so that the reporter does not need to gather everything from scratch.

Pitfalls to avoid

When giving interviews to the media try to focus on the main points and remember that journalists need a headline, so try to provide one (otherwise journalists will have to find one themselves).

A distinction is often made between pure and applied research. This distinction is, in many ways, misleading, particularly in the case of research with a focus on children and their experiences on the internet. Researchers are thus advised that their research results, no matter how theoretically pure they are intended to be, could be used as a basis for decision making or policy development.

Example of a project with findings that could be misrepresented

The University of New Hampshire findings on children's exposure to online risk have been sufficiently misrepresented for them to issue a statement to the press outlining both good reporting of complex statistics and poor reporting, following a 'Do say' and 'Don't say' format. Headed 'Internet Safety Education for Teens: Getting It Right', they note that 'A growing number of people are promoting Internet safety education in an effort to help keep youngsters safe from Internet sex offenders. But some of the information in their lectures, pamphlets, videos, and web sites does not reflect what researchers have learned about the important features of these crimes. Here are suggestions of how to make Internet safety education materials more consistent with current research.' (www.unh.edu/ccrc/internet-crimes/Internet%20Factsheet_portrait%20version_2-6-08_khf.pdf)

References and further resources

For examples of newsletters and short reports see: www.eukidsonline.net

McNair, B. (2006) Cultural Chaos: Journalism and Power in a Globalised World. New York, Routledge.