How to win readers & influence policy

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September 2021
Topics for discussion

• General tips for public-facing writing
• Structure pieces around strong titles/headers
• Storytelling with data
• Incorporating evidence without getting bogged down
• Politically neutral but policy relevant
Examples

• Translating technical material for general audience
  – Larrimore & Troland: Improving Housing Payment Projections
  – Schuetz: How many households can’t pay next month’s rent

• Long report & short summary
  – Boston Indicators & Brookings Metro: Zoned Out
  – Brookings Metro: Fixing Greater Boston’s housing crisis

• Short, non-data-intensive pieces
  – Four reasons why more public housing isn’t the solution to affordability concerns
  – Three lessons 21st century housing policy could learn from Little Women
General tips

• Attention spans are short! Public-facing writing should be too.
  – Break up big ideas into series of multiple short pieces (ideally under 1000 words).
  – Write one long piece for other researchers & short summary for non-experts.
• Don’t assume potential readers are already interested in your topic.
• It’s not a murder mystery. Lead with your key finding or recommendation.
• Use minimal jargon & define specialized terms clearly.
General tips, part 2

• Who is your target audience?
  – All voters or handful of decision-makers?
  – What’s their existing knowledge of the topic? Level of technical expertise?

• What do you want to achieve with the piece?
  – Ex: raise general awareness of an issue, counter an existing narrative, nudge an ongoing debate

• Hot topic of the moment or evergreen?
  – Pros and cons to framing within immediate news cycle versus longer-term issue
Structure pieces around strong titles

• Overall titles should:
  – Summarize key results or questions
  – Include key terms that will show up in Google searches (e.g. "search engine optimized")

• Break up piece into short sections with strong sub-heads
  – Sentence or phrase summarizing main point

• Each graph/figure should tell self-contained story
  – Graph titles summarize substantive conclusion
  – Subtitles detail variables, geography, etc.
  – Footnote lists data sources & technical notes
Figure 3. Townhouses and condos offer substantial cost savings over new single-family homes

Development costs for new housing, by structure type

Source: Full details of the calculations, including underlying data and assumptions, are available in Crump, Mattos, Schuetz and Schuster (2020). Names refer to station areas listed above.
Storytelling with data

• Use graphs or charts instead of tables whenever possible.
  – Cost estimates in “Fixing Greater Boston” are backed by complex pro forma spreadsheets

• Descriptive statistics can convey most information from regressions & are less scary.
  – Avoid Greek letters & mathematical notation
  – See: Larrimore & Troland vs Schuetz

• Focus on results, not data & methods
  – If methodology section is unavoidable, make it an appendix at the end.
Pictures are worth 1,000 words

Figure 2. Less yard, more homes
Schematics of single-family lots converted to townhouses or low-rise multifamily condos

**Melrose Cedar Park**  |  Average lot size ~ 6,995 sq ft
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One single-family  
Two townhouses  
Three condos

**Needham Heights**  |  Average lot size ~ 12,930 sq ft
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One single-family  
Two townhouses  
Six condos

**Wellesley Hills**  |  Average lot size ~ 24,506 sq ft
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One single-family  
Five townhouses  
11 condos
Incorporating evidence

• Formal lit reviews generally don’t fit in public-facing pieces
• Focus on key results of previous research, not data & methods (or authors)
• Use hyperlinks instead of footnotes or internal citations
• From “4 reasons why public housing...”:
  “Public housing developed from the 1950s through 1970s was largely built in poor, racially segregated neighborhoods...”

  “Where people live—and especially where children grow up—is critical to long-term well-being, including life expectancy, health, and income.”
Staying politically neutral

• Almost every policy topic is political, but not necessarily partisan
  – Land use policy pits homeowners against renters
  – Transit policy: drivers versus transit riders, cyclists, & pedestrians

• Concrete recommendations are an important part of public-facing writing
  – Policymakers need better real-time data on renters’ well-being
  – Zoning reforms should be paired with increased vouchers

• Comment on policy substance, avoid partisan (or intra-partisan) endorsements

• Be transparent about value judgments & priorities
1% inspiration, 99% perspiration

• Writing well is hard work! Practice helps.

• It’s much easier to see the flaws in other people’s writing. Find someone who will read your drafts & provide honest constructive feedback.
Comments & questions welcome!

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