

research snapshot

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Knowledge Mobilization as Design: The Canadian Homelessness Research Network

What is this research about?

A key challenge in developing solutions to homelessness is that research does not always have a big impact on policy and practice. Typical ways of publishing academic research make it difficult to understand. Research is often presented in ways that make it challenging for policy makers and practitioners to use.

Academic papers and reports are usually published by academic journals. The peer review process is meant to maintain a high intellectual standard. The way research is written and presented in scholarly journals is intended to appeal to academics. The fact that most academic presses are owned by large communications companies has resulted in rising costs for university subscribers. In addition, strict copyright laws make it hard for the average reader to get access to the articles.

The scholarly journal may not be the best way for researchers to get their research results to policy makers and community members. For those interested in creating an impact for their research, there is a need to rethink how research is written, presented and disseminated. Traditional approaches are not getting the research to a broader audience.

What you need to know:

Researchers do not have to rely on traditional approaches to academic publishing. With changing technologies knowledge mobilizers have an increasing variety of tools. Using ‘design thinking’ can lead to innovative approaches to publishing strategically designed to increase the reach of research.

The CHRN has been successful by both consulting and collaborating with key stakeholders. This practice changes the research, writing and publication processes. The CHRN uses an approach to publishing that removes the need to rely on corporate owned scholarly journals to get material out. This has meant linking researchers, graphic designers and technology experts to create new ways of presenting, publishing and marketing materials.

What did the researcher do?

The researcher uses the concept of “design thinking” to suggest new possibilities for academic publishing. The CHRN is used as a case study to highlight how such a design approach has led to innovation in publishing and dissemination of homelessness research. The research focused on the experiences of creating

and sharing recent large reports and e-books. The purpose of this case study is to look at the ways that design focus has informed all of the areas of research from planning to knowledge mobilization.

What did the researcher find?

Research can have a greater impact when there is collaboration and partnership between researchers and the potential users of research. This means encouraging active collaboration between researchers, communities and different professions (such as graphic designers and information technology specialists). A design approach can help make research available to more audiences outside of academics. This is because different groups obtain and use information in different ways. The partnerships between researchers and community inform every step of the process. Formats of delivering information must be designed for the user.

CHRN has achieved this by using a range of formats. In addition to releasing a report CHRN may also release research summaries, blog posts, videos and infographics. The different formats allow for more audiences to access the information. CHRN has been successful at spreading this information through a well thought out communications and marketing strategy, and through the use of social media campaigns.

One challenge is to maintain the rigour of peer reviewed content seen in academic journals. The CHRN has overcome this barrier by using a peer review process for its reports and e-books. This has allowed the CHRN to distribute powerful reports that are more cost effective and have a much broader reach than traditional publishing.

How can you use this research?

A design approach works well for knowledge mobilization. Researchers should think of the needs of the audience they are trying to reach and include them in their planning processes. Schools and organizations should look to build capacity for small-scale publishing.

About the Researcher

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Knowledge Mobilization at York

York's Knowledge Mobilization Unit provides services for faculty, graduate students, community and government seeking to maximize the impact of academic research and expertise on public policy, social programming, and professional practice. This summary has been supported by the Office of the Vice-President Research and Innovation at York and project funding from SSHRC and CIHR.

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