Introducing the IDEAS Guide

This talk was presented by Dr Jessica Noske-Turner at the Symposium: Mobilising Media for Sustainable Outcomes in the Pacific Region launch event on December 8th, 2016 at RMIT University Melbourne. This was the official launch of the IDEAS Guide, by Jessica Noske-Turner, Heather Horst and Jo Tacchi, available at http://betterevaluation.org/en/resources/guide/IDEAS_Guide

I have the very great pleasure to research media communication for development and social change. These images represent just a small proportion of the projects funded through the PACMAS Innovation Fund in the Pacific. These are local, Pacific-based organisations and individuals making films about gender-based violence; installing new equipment that enables open air radio broadcasting from remote islands; teaching young people creative skills like photography and film making so they can express themselves and speak to power; engaging in dialogue about issues that matter to Pacific Islanders; and experimenting with new ways of doing eLearning for journalists.

These are all beautiful ideas and impressive projects. But the challenge is, and has always been, how do you judge the value projects like this? How do you evaluate?

This is the question I have spent more or less the last five years working on. Through the Mobilising Media project we’ve looked at this question in relation to the PACMAS Innovation Fund. Before

1 refers to slide with photos of projects
that, this question was the focus of my doctoral research, where I focused on a program in Cambodia to introduce talkback radio, which was also managed by ABC International Development. For the past two and a half years I have also been working on a project partnering with UNICEF working on basically the same questions and the same challenges. Professor Jo Tacchi, one of the Chief Investigators on the Mobilising Media project, has been working on this problem for much longer.

My research on the challenges of evaluation for the Cambodian Communication Assistance Program came up with the following four key principles:

- Plan early, adapt periodically, evaluate regularly
- Involve stakeholders in planning and evaluation
- Ensure evaluation designs are theoretically informed and framed
- And focus on proving and improving

These principles are both simple and uncontroversial, and yet radical in the context of what actually happens.

Professor Jo Tacchi’s work (together with her co-author, Dr June Lennie) culminated in a conceptual framework for evaluating communication for development, which has been influential across the world.

These two sources (together with the BetterEvaluation website) heavily inform the IDEAS Guide that we are launching today. However, without the engagement (through the Mobilising Media project) with practitioners and co-creative processes with ABC International Development, PACMAS and media and communication practitioners from across the Pacific (some of whom are sitting here today, - the IDEAS Guide would not be the guide that you see today. In case you think this is a bit of hyperbole, I will demonstrate this fact by showing you some of the earlier versions that we tried:

The Evaluation Planning Cards – these did not work.

The Communication for Sustainable Change Design Circle – this did not work.

The Bubble-plotting-thing – this did not work.

Now I want to turn to the IDEAS Guide itself. IDEAS is an acronym that refers to Innovating, Designing, Evaluating and
Applying to Small Scale media and communication projects, and this gives some clues as to the intentions. I want to share three key points about what makes the IDEAS Guide unique.

A guide for non-evaluators

Although there are hundreds, if not thousands of resources out there on evaluation, there are not many (if any) resources that are intended as entry-level guides to monitoring and evaluation of a range of media and communication projects. Second, most evaluation guides are fairly dry and expect you to sit at a computer and muddle through options and write up a whole lot of documents and tables. The IDEAS Guide is intended for practitioners, who also need to do some monitoring and evaluation. There are 10 modules in the guide, and in each one we’ve tried to create a hands-on activity that helps to work through the decisions that need to be made. As much as possible we use key participatory techniques with an emphasis on visual and tactile processes to spark reflections, discussions and negotiations. Those decisions can then be transferred to more formal and official formats.

For example, one of the first activities in the Guide aims to help project teams really think through what the project is about (pictured above). It borrows from the proportional piling technique where stones or seeds or other objects are used, in this case to weigh up and compare how significant or not these approaches are. And these four approaches are actually informed Dr Linje Manyozo’s work on unpacking the core underlying approaches to media, communication and development.

This process is actually critically important, as in my previous research I noticed a tendency for projects that were mainly about, for example, capacity building of media practitioners and the dialogue processes they were learning to facilitate, to be evaluated based on increases in knowledge among audiences. There’s a slippage that often happens in media and communication to test knowledge and behaviors, because it is easier to think about measuring, but this misses the essence of what made that program valuable.

The colour coding that you see here is used again later to see which kinds of evaluation questions might match the kind of project, and again on the methods cards. These methods cards also borrow from a well known participatory technique (hierarchical card sorting). And you can see them in use here (below).

(Left) Proportional piling to decide: What are we trying to do, how are we trying to do it?; (right) Using methods cards
A Learning-Based Approach

The second point is about the approach that the guide encourages. Most people think of evaluation as something expert evaluators do, and it is usually left to the end of the project. The IDEAS Guide is about helping project teams design the evaluation as part of the process of designing the project, focusing on learning and improvement throughout the project. So not just about 'what' has happened, throughout the project continually asking 'how well are we doing', and 'how could we do it better'.

The sailing metaphor, which is threaded throughout the IDEAS Guide, is one of the most powerful and beautiful ways, I think, that the IDEAS Guide does this. Faumuina Felolini Maria Tafuna’i, who is on our discussion panel, was the one who contributed this idea of sailing to an island as being like doing an innovative project. Faumuina will be able to explain it better than I can, but the way this simple idea of sailing - with the fact that you can't sail in a straight line, and you can't control the winds and tides - disrupts our very top-down, western logic of making a plan and then sticking to the road is a great contribution not just to this guide, but also I think to the field of development and evaluation more broadly.

The other important way we encourage a learning-based approach through the guide is to recognise and build on existing knowledge that practitioners already have. Practitioners all want to do the best project they can, and are probably already doing things like asking for feedback and finding out what's working. The IDEAS guide is about demystifying evaluation and arming teams with the skills to do those feedback and reflection processes in an organised and systematic way. And, importantly, arming them with the language to describe what they are doing in ways that are recognised and valued by those they report to.

The introduction to Part 2 is a good example of this. Here we describe the following:

- 'data' is information that is collected systematically
- 'analysing' is making sense of data
- and 'evidence' is data and information that is collected and analysed systematically, that can be used to show what is working, or not working.

The Facilitators’ Guide

The third intervention is the IDEAS Facilitators’ Guide. And this is where I think Professor Heather Horst deserves particular recognition of the vision and direction of that. The IDEAS Facilitators Guide was a fairly late addition to the IDEAS Package. It was something that was in the back of our minds for a few months in the lead up to our last workshop in Vanuatu. At that workshop it became very obvious that the Facilitators Guide was not going be just a minor little add-on, or an excuse not to do a thorough job with the IDEAS Guide; we realised the Facilitators Guide was going to be a critical piece of the package to bring a human dimension to the implementation of the guide. This resonates with some existing literature on participatory evaluation, where the critical role of facilitators and evaluation coaches is emphasised. We think donors and funding organisations can help support capacity building, and would encourage all such organisations to build this important role into program design.

Facilitating a workshop in Vanuatu
I would like to leave as much time to hear from our panel as possible, but to conclude, I want to say to this audience: it is our hope that the IDEAS Guide and the IDEAS Facilitators’ Guide is used and adapted in the Pacific, and beyond. It will be available for download on BetterEvaluation, and it will be published under a creative commons license. Success for us would mean that we continue to hear from people about how they’ve used it, what’s not working and needs fixing, or even better, their own fixes.

More broadly, success also means seeing many more vibrant and innovative media and communication projects being implemented by Pacific Islanders and contributing to sustainable social change.

Thank you.