

Using video to communicate policy research

By Michael Kleiman | May 2017

Think tanks around the globe are experiencing a revolution in the way that they communicate their research and policy ideas to the world. While the fundamental goals of think tanks have remained the same – influencing policy decisions and shaping public discourse – the means through which they achieve those goals are in a state of rapid flux. World changing ideas that are written up in research reports and made available online as downloadable PDFs are unlikely to be noticed. In fact, a 2014 study by the World Bank found that nearly one third of the Bank’s online written reports were not read a single time and nearly 88% had no citations.¹ For their part, policy makers only read thirty minutes a day on average.² This means that, for organizations like the World Bank that spend nearly one quarter of their annual budget on knowledge products, finding a better way to engage their audiences should be of the highest priority.

As one think tank communications officer put it to me:

“We are competing for an audience that is becoming more and more saturated with media and so we’re competing for...attention.”

This means that think tanks need to diversify the products they create to be relevant in the public square and capture the imagination of not only policy makers but that of the public as well.³

Video has proven to be a powerful way to engage a diverse group of audiences, both online and offline. At [MediaTank](#), we spend a lot of time working with think tanks to better understand what their goals are and how video can help them achieve them. Broadly speaking we find that video can help think tanks achieve these five goals:

- Influence decision makers;
- Engage the public/raise awareness of issues and place pressure on policy makers;
- Frame/reframe public policy issues and shape discussions at public forums;
- Raise institutional stature and the stature of an organization’s experts/affiliates;
- Train others on best practices.

Achieving each of these goals requires reaching distinct audiences that speak different vernaculars. As we will discuss in our first webinar, being able to identify which goals your organization wishes to achieve and what audience you need to reach in order to achieve them is a critical first step in creating successful video content. Therefore, it's worth spending some time thinking about your specific goals and your target audience before our first webinar. Think tanks that are better able to articulate such targets are not only more likely to create effective content, but will also have an easier time evaluating their success afterwards.

Reaching A Policy Maker Audience

Not surprisingly, we find that a common target audience for think tanks tends to be policy makers themselves. Unfortunately, in speaking with policy makers and their staffs we have found that videos currently produced by think tanks are rarely seen as valuable resources.

In fact, in one of our studies, less than 20% of policy makers said they found think tank videos to be a useful resource (by the way, the same low percentage said that they regularly read written reports). Does that mean that video is a lost cause for influencing this audience? On the contrary, nearly 85% of those same policy makers said they watched at least one video online *every single day*. What's more, these were videos about policy issues! And some cited videos that had huge impacts on the way they thought about specific issues. In fact, we were told of several videos that were brought up in high-level meetings with policy makers that included US Senators and the US Secretary of State. The problem it seems is not with the medium, but rather with the specific approach that many think tanks are taking to creating videos.

So what are so many think tanks doing wrong? The policy makers we spoke with boiled the shortcomings of think tank videos down to the following:

- The content is superficial and tends to be geared toward a more lay audience;
- The videos are often poorly produced and boring;
- The videos rarely tell a compelling story;
- Think tank videos too often focus on presenting data and numbers through infographics, which are easier to read/engage with in other formats.

So, What Works?

The good news is that in diagnosing where current think tank video efforts fall short, we can begin to compile a list of best practices that differentiates successful video content. We'll spend the bulk of our time during the two webinars discussing best practices related to both how a video is made (the production process) and how it is disseminated to its target audience (distribution). There are two key points that are worth mentioning now: the importance of story and using video to *show* a problem.

Just as data and evidence are the bulwarks of any good research report, a compelling story is what makes a video worth watching. Not only are stories engaging, they are incredibly effective at influencing both the general public and policy makers. Further, stories have an inherent value to policy makers who can repurpose them in their own communications – in speeches, emails to constituents, etc.

Again, there's good news here: all policy issues are inherently tied to powerful stories. Whether they are stories about individuals who live with a problem that policy can address or stories that chronicle the progress of a new program that offers an effective solution, public policy is a world that is inextricably linked to narratives that can be used to influence others.

In advance of our first webinar, spend some time thinking about the issues you are working on and what stories can help illuminate the issue or highlight a potential solution. Here is an example of a video I made that leverages an intimate story to bring a complex issue to life: "[Wiring The Amazon](#)" (The New York Times).

The second thing to consider gets at the heart of video's comparative advantage over other media: its ability to allow a viewer to *see a problem for themselves*. This is something that can be quite difficult to do in a written report, but is fundamental to an effective video. Just as you consider stories that might help an audience engage with an issue, think about what the issue you are working on looks like on the ground and how you might show that in a video. As an example, watch this short video that does a great job of offering the viewer first hand images of a what a problem looks like for those experiencing it everyday: [10 Hours of Walking in NYC As A Woman](#) (Hollaback!).

A Segmented Communications Strategy

While video is an incredibly effective medium for reaching a range of audiences, it is not an engagement panacea. To be most effective, think tanks need a communications strategy that incorporates a plethora of products that can be used in tandem in order to achieve the organization's goals. Video should therefore be seen as one part of a broader communications effort that includes multiple products, such as written reports, policy briefs, op-eds, podcasts, data visualizations, events, interactives and education guides. Having a full "suite" of such products recognizes that what works for one audience may not work for another.

In creating these products, it's important to remember that different media have different strengths. Therefore a video created alongside a written research report, should not simply be a summary of that report. The report needs to be adapted to the medium in order to take advantage of its unique strengths. In the case of video that means finding the story embedded within the research. It means seeking out the "who" of the report and letting the audience engage with the issue from their perspective.

A helpful illustration of such a segmented communications strategy comes in a [short video](#) that I produced for On Think Tanks TV. The video highlights the range of tools that New America created in order reach multiple audiences.

Webinars

The life cycle of any video is typically broken down into three phases: pre-production (the idea is conceived and a plan is created), production (the video is created), and distribution (the video is disseminated in accordance with a well laid strategy). Our Short Course will cover all three phases during our two sessions. The first webinar will focus on pre-production and production. Here we'll look at best practices related to identifying your goals and your audience and adapting your research into a compelling story. We'll also discuss practical concerns related to quality, budget and timelines.

In our second webinar, we'll finish off our discussion of the production process and focus on distribution. Many organizations put all of their attention and resources into the production of a video, assuming that once created the video will just go viral. In this session, we'll look at "the myth of virality" and discuss the importance of putting together an overarching distribution and outreach strategy to ensure your video's success.

With all of the talk about the importance of goals and audience, I should be clear about what I aim to teach in this class and who I see as the target audience. This is not a class that will give you hands on skills for using a camera, lighting an interview or editing a video yourself. Rather, we'll look at the pre-production, production and distribution processes from a high level with a focus on strategy, storytelling and management. The audience is therefore not aspiring filmmakers, but people who will more likely be overseeing teams that are working to create a piece on their behalf. We'll talk a little bit about ways to incorporate video into the research process itself, but that will not be our primary focus.

References

1. Doemeland, Dante and James Trevino. Which World Bank Reports Are Widely Read? The World Bank, Development Economics Vice Presidency, Operations and Strategy Unit. May 2014.
2. Dant Mcgann, James G. "2016 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report" (2017). TTCSP Global Go To Think Tank Index Reports. 12.
3. Schwartz, John. "A Permanent Revolution in Think Tank Communications." On Think Tanks. February 24, 2017.