

The *savoir-faire* in policy engagement

By Dyhia Belhabib

I remember vividly the first time I went out there and was yelled at in a room full of government officials.

Seven years have passed, and I would like to say that I have learned on the “*tas*” like we say in French.

See, in fisheries, it is often an out of sight, out of mind issue. When we cannot see something, it becomes so difficult to deal with it, that we prefer to ignore its existence. This is not only in fisheries...actually! Then, when an outsider says: “*you have a problem*”, we take it personally. We become patriotic and say that either the issue is solved...

““ *We have an excellent navy, and transshipments at sea do not occur anymore.*

– while you clearly can see some on AIS, or that it has never happened as in

““ *We do not have illegal fishing here.*

And you desperately look for evidence to back up your claim...

““ *Those are photoshoped [military] pictures*

Trust me, you never want to sound like this guy, but given that he is now the leader of one of the most powerful Nations in the world, his “strongly evidence-backed” arguments will become more common, as the political denialist discourse will become **bolder**.



I did learn to adjust my language, my culture, and the recommendations emanating from the scientific work I conducted and my research findings. I was happily an academic outside of the ivory tower, and it was not taken so well I must say. Not because I was outside of the tower, but because often times, the strategies of those that were up high in that tower were very much inviting ridiculous arguments by their opponents in the political and policy spheres. I discuss some of the mistakes in my blog post "[how to squeeze policy out of the science](#)". As an academic, I never agreed with the idea that we were only supposed to do the research, and that the engagement work was the responsibility of advocates. That just makes it too easy to make unrealistic recommendations, which can have drastic consequences on people, the ecosystem, and the economy, let alone the connections people have with their natural environment. In fisheries, we can easily say "*we need to reduce the fishing effort*", in the real world, that means killing the jobs of thousands of people. This is particularly dangerous in developing countries or poor countries where people are heavily relying on fish for food, income, health, education, and where fishing provides work that keeps the youth from social upheavals. A study published recently for [Tanzania](#) does show that shoving conservation measures down the throat of communities does not necessarily work. The approach has to be evidence driven, pragmatic, and in consideration of all external factors (the ecosystem, the economy, the people, and the intangible values we often miss).

Fishing in Algeria was a way out of terror and violence. What would you do with the thousands of young people who were otherwise engaged in terror activities? Either you put them in overcrowded jails, where they will never be able to be rehabilitated to society, or you forgive them and you give them a job. Algerians chose to forgive, and give a chance to the youth, just like Leonians and Liberians did after the civil war. But what would you do with that youth as a government when immediate options are limited, and the country is just rebuilding? The answer was simple: subsidize super small-scale fishing vessels, call them "recreational boats" and let the youth go fish for leisure. We all know there is a massive black market of high value fish caught by these "recreational fishers", and they – as in the government – may be choosing to disregard this issue. Yes, stocks are over-exploited, and yes,

monitoring **was** really weak, but as a scientist worried about sardines being over-exploited, and sea floor being disturbed but trawling activities, you have to be just as much aware of the situation of the country because advising for a reduction of the fishing fleet, in this case, could have –in its first years - literally resulted in killing people. Think of the options twice.



OR

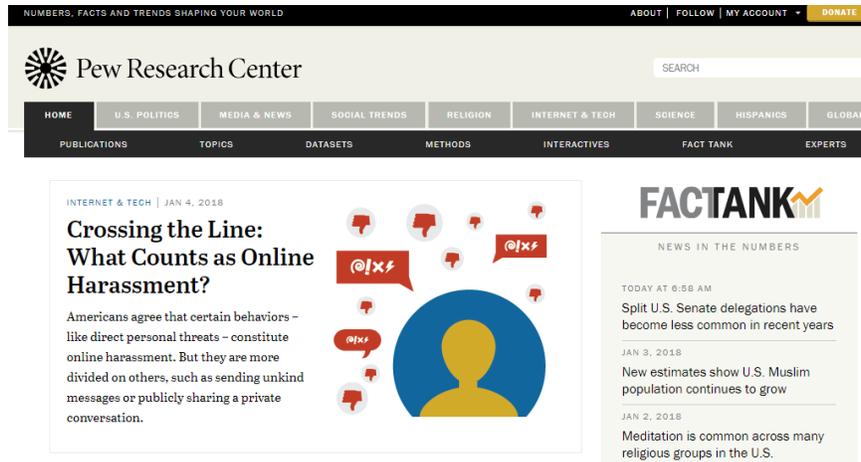


I think of policy engagement as a shifting paradigm, it used to be the responsibility of practitioners, but not anymore. The changing political environment, and the social media world where the general public has access to information, whether accurate or not, makes it vital for academics to actually participate actively in policy engagement and science communication. I talked about this recently at the Simon Fraser University Policy Spotlight Seminar Series (see below for the talk), highlighting this shift. Life is a constant opportunity to learn. I always took it as a given that practitioners are systematically good at it. But think of it for a second, what if they are not.

I have been exposed recently to the work of practitioners who have an extraordinary will to change things for the better, however when they are lacking the science, or rather avoiding it, it soon becomes a question of “*what the heck?*”. Indeed, Practitioners do not necessarily know how to engage. They often take it for granted, and they fall in the same mistakes: lack of knowledge of strategy, lack of respect for the culture, patriotism, ignoring the science, and what I have seen more recently: falling in the conflict of interest situation where one ignores the science as it is too risky for the industry.

Policy is not only impacted by science, and a report or a peer reviewed paper recommendation is not enough. I have attempted to recreate the scheme of things that have driven policy decisions in various countries based on my few experiences. Needless to say, it gets messy very fast.

Pew, or the Pews as I call them, with which I had an extraordinary opportunity to watch and learn do a lot of policy engagement work. They do the research and they fund it. They are practitioners who believe in pragmatic and long term solutions that involve constant educations. I have seen them during United Nations meetings, and I really admired how they work along the policy engagement chain. They educate first, and do an amazing work of science communication, and they tell stories in a short and concise way that is adapted to the busy schedule of people. Then, they plan for the right time and right place to engage. This takes a lot of knowledge of the processes, events, and opportunities, and on how to avoid “faux pas”.



<http://www.pewresearch.org/>

Our heroes from Environmental Justice Foundation, whose work contributed massively to unraveling and, basically, dismantling a massive slavery and human trafficking network in [Thailand](#), are very present as well. Their reports, very visually appealing and easy to read, are backed up by strong investigations bound with respect for human lives, traditions, and anonymity. As you read their work, you will see that they truly care. Their investigative work is, then, handed to governments. Often, they get involved in government efforts, they were in Sierra Leone for years training communities and government staff to conduct Monitoring Control and Surveillance, and in Liberia, including during very difficult times.



<https://ejfoundation.org/>

And then, you have Greenpeace, which in some “old school” minds, are still associated with breaking into nuclear plants, or into labs and saving animals from cruelty. I will say Greenpeace raises hell where hell is supposed to be. They do it well. They kind of resemble Environmental Justice Foundation in that they conduct their own work, borrowing findings from academic research from time to time to fuel their campaigns (which is an excellent thing), but today they build cases, capacity, and contribute to the actual field work. They conducted along with West African nation major surveillance efforts against illegal fishing, and they caught many “[crooks](#)”.



<http://www.greenpeace.org/canada/en/home/>

One can add [Global Fishing Watch](#), [Vulcan](#), and many others to the list.

I like to call these organizations, along with others, “a school of policy engagement for academics”. Researchers in academia need to be exposed to the fields outside of the ivory tower.