



Pathways to use of communication campaigns' evaluation findings within international organizations

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a study on the pathways and processes regarding the use of evaluation findings of communication campaigns from two international organizations, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Several years after the completion of the campaigns and their evaluations, our research identified 28 instances of use and six instances of non-use of the evaluation results, of which the large majority being surprising in nature. Results showed that evaluation use facilitated formal and informal changes at the individual and the organizational level; and, this pattern occurred in a predominantly non-linear fashion, interconnected and overlapping, while gradually decreasing in time and space. Evaluation use was mostly unpredictable, which reflected how meanings are constructed by staff members, as they adjusted and interpreted the findings in opportunistic ways.

Evaluation use (or utilization) has received considerable attention in the evaluation field, as many empirical and conceptual studies have sought to understand how it facilitates changes at individual and organizational levels (Alkin, Daillak, & White, 1979; Christie, 2007; Ciarlo, 1981; Cousins, Goh, Elliott, & Bourgeois, 2014; Johnson et al., 2009; Patton et al., 1977; Weiss, 1979). However, researchers have concluded that contemporary theories of evaluation use are, “simultaneously impoverished and overgrown”; “Impoverished” in that there has been little understanding of the underlying processes that lead to use; “Overgrown” in that too much attention has been paid to the categorization of use and what influences use (Mark & Henry, 2004, p. 37).

This article contributes to the understanding of underlying processes that lead to evaluation use: additionally, it aims to understand how evaluation use actually occurs by mapping individual instances of use or non-use of two evaluations. This is based on a conceptual framework drawing from the model of Henry and Mark (2003), while expanding it to consider issues of meaning, linearity and anticipation. We base our observations on findings from communication campaigns of two international organizations, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). These evaluations were conducted in 2009 and 2010; and, some four years later, these evaluations were again revisited to examine the underlying processes of use.

The definition for ‘evaluation use’ was proposed by Johnson et al.

(2009) as, “any application of evaluation processes, products, or findings [used] to produce an effect” (p. 378). This definition of evaluation use has been expanded to also include ‘evaluation influence’, defined as the, “capacity or power of persons or things to produce effects on others by intangible or indirect means” (Kirkhart, 2000, p. 7). However, it is important to distinguish that this article makes reference to *use* rather than *influence*. We consider the *direct* effect of evaluation findings *within* the organizations (‘use’) rather than *indirect* effect *outside or inside* the organizations (‘influence’). Thus, the construct of influence is less of interest because it is indirect (Johnson et al., 2009); here we will examine the ‘direct use’ of evaluation findings within organizations.

1. Literature review

Different forms of evaluation use have been described and debated in the literature with broad consensus emerging around four types: instrumental, conceptual, symbolic and process use (Ciarlo, 1981; Cousins & Leithwood, 1986; Patton, 2000; Shulha & Cousins, 1997). Together with these definitions, the majority of the research has focused on determining which factors may increase evaluation use.

At first, these factors focused on the methods, quality and products of the evaluation and organizational settings, with less focus on other factors, notably human users and their context (Alkin & Taut, 2002; Højlund, 2014a). Context factors were integrated from the 1980s onwards, including resource scarcity (Mowbray, 1992), organizational

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structures and processes, program aspects (Mathison, 1994; Torres, Preskill & Piotnek, 1996), institutional contexts (Højlund, 2014a), and the existing evaluation practices within organizations (Højlund, 2014b). However, research studies on human factors have focused on skills and competences of the evaluator rather than the user (Contandriopoulos & Brousselle, 2012; Cousins & Leithwood, 1986; Johnson et al., 2009; Shulha & Cousins, 1997).

1.1. Pathways model of use

When broadening the range of factors, researchers started to consider the processes of use itself, which is also the focus of this article (Cousins, 2003; Henry & Mark, 2003; Mark & Henry, 2004). Drawing from organizational and social behavior theories, Mark and Henry extended the model to processes and pathways for change at the personal, interpersonal, and collective levels. Their model described a taxonomy of underlying mechanisms that lead to evaluation use at each level. For example, at the individual level, a program manager “elaborates” by reading the evaluation report, reflecting on her current approach, and then changing certain aspects of the findings. At the interpersonal level, a discussion within the project team involves members ‘persuading’ each other of the merits of some findings. At the collective level, an evaluation report can lead to ‘policy change’.

There have been two documented attempts to apply the pathways model to studies of evaluation use, but they were not successful. The researchers cited difficulties in adjusting their methodologies and collecting data needed for pathway modeling. However, they focused on identifying indirect influences on evaluation use (Johnson et al., 2009; Weiss, Murphy-Graham & Birkeland, 2005).

2. Conceptual framework

Drawing from Mark and Henry’s model and the existing literature and research, we developed a conceptual framework with five categories to analyze instances of use:

1) *Was use anticipated or unanticipated?* Anticipated use was defined as use being based on explicit recommendations of an evaluation report. Unanticipated use occurred when an instance of use was drawn from the evaluation findings, implied or explicit, but was not a formal recommendation (what Kirkhart (2000) referred to as “unintended” use).

2) *Type of use.* Four types of use were considered as mentioned above; conceptual, instrumental, process and symbolic. Non-use was added and defined for this study when an instance was identified, such as an evaluation report recommendation or finding, but no use occurred. In other words, a non-use was added when there was no action taken as a result of the recommendation or finding (Ciarlo, 1981; Cousins & Leithwood, 1986; Patton, 2000; Shulha & Cousins, 1997). This type of non-use has been referred to as “active” non-use, in that a person has been active in not using a given recommendation or finding (Alkin & King, 2017). Instances of “Passive” non-use were not considered within this definition; that is, when a person was not aware of an evaluation and therefore took no action.

3) *Level of use.* Three levels of use were considered, individual, interpersonal and collective, as developed by Henry and Mark (2003).

4) *Process attributes.* The attributes used are those identified by Henry and Mark (2003) that describe the mechanisms through which change occurs as a result of the evaluation, and are split over the three levels of use. For example, these would include attitude change at the individual use, or policy change at the collective level.

5) *Instance validation.* Each instance was triangulated and validated with documentation of the organization and/or other interview respondents, based on validation strategies of previous studies of

evaluation use (Ciarlo, 1981; Højlund, 2014b; Weiss et al., 2005).

In addition to these five categories we broadened the model to consider the concepts of reception and meaning. We considered the initial “reception process”, how the meaning of evaluation results emerged afterwards and what use people made of these results; the meaning of which they have created. Evaluation reports are texts, and as with most written communication, the interpretation is not fully determined by the “text” itself. The meaning of the text, and in our case of the evaluation reports, builds upon several factors such as 1. situational context, 2. the processes, 3. resources available, and 4., the text itself (Bauer, 1964).

Parallels can be observed in audience reception studies of mass media programs, which ask: How do people receive and make sense of media texts? The debates on audience autonomy have been likened to a pendulum swinging between times when we believed audiences are entirely passive, and that it is the “text” that determines its meaning and ‘use’ operates like a hypodermic needle injection. At other times, we have believed that audiences are freely interpreting the “text”, giving it even opposite readings from those intended; as such, the ‘text’ has little determining power (Bauer, 1964; Hall, 1980; Katz, 1980). The literature also recognizes that the reception process is a dialogue between audiences and authors that influences meaning; similarly, the level of involvement of people in an evaluation process influences their use of its findings (Johnson et al., 2009).

3. Methodology

This article examines the pathways regarding the use of evaluation findings within two communication campaigns for the OHCHR and ICRC. Both campaign evaluations were carried out by one of the authors in 2009–2010 in collaboration with the communication units of the organizations, using qualitative and quantitative methods (O’Neil, 2015).

The ICRC is the founding body of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent (RCRC) Movement. From January 2009 to December 2009, the ICRC ran a global campaign, “Our world. Your move” on the 60th anniversary of the Geneva Conventions. The aim of the campaign was to raise awareness of today’s major humanitarian challenges and the work of the RCRC Movement.

The OHCHR is a component of the United Nations system and conducted a global campaign on the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) from December 2007 to December 2008. The aim of the campaign was to increase knowledge and awareness of human rights among the broadest audiences possible, while also empowering rights holders to claim and enjoy their rights.

Beginning in 2014, the researchers interviewed the campaign managers in the ICRC and OHCHR, who had both managed the campaigns and commissioned these evaluations. In this respect, given the managers’ involvement, the context could be considered favorable to evaluation use (Johnson et al., 2009). The managers referred to other staff that knew of and potentially used the evaluation findings. We thus used a snowball sampling technique, which led to six interviews with ICRC staff and five interviews with OHCHR staff. Interviews were semi-structured and focused on identifying instances of use or non-use of the evaluations, and how use was perceived and validated among staff.

We also analyzed internal documentation regarding the campaigns and references in the continuing policy processes. Documentation was examined and considered in an iterative manner; as staff mentioned documentation in their descriptions of use or non-use, copies of the said documentation were requested. This documentation included those internal to the organizations, such as campaign concepts, strategies and implementation plans, and those publicly available, such as campaign goals and objectives and organizational-level communication policies.

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