

Knowledge Mobilization: Useful to Grassroots Organizing? (Paper)

Abstract or Résumé:

My presentation focuses on the movement of information and knowledge to create social change. I explore whether Knowledge Mobilization (KMb) units could assist grassroots movements in sharing their goals and information with a broader audience. I do so through a textual analysis of a KMb unit social media and publications. Findings suggest that while a KMb does provide a variety of services, they are focused on supporting academics. Thus, it is unclear if connecting with a KMb unit would help a grassroots movement.

1. Introduction

Grassroots movements — a group of people, organising to see social change occur — have a history of difficulty ensuring that their goals are clear to people outside the movement itself (Milan, 2015). Thomas Poell and José van Dijck (2015) describe these struggles with mainstream media below:

“Gaining public visibility through mainstream media has always proven difficult, as it forced activists to make concessions about how they present themselves publicly, catering to mass media’s need for spectacle, conflict, and flamboyant newsworthy individuals” (p. 527).

This challenge means that grassroots movements have needed to be innovative in how they share their messages. Some of these unique means of sharing information that grassroots movements had were: children’s books, comics, video games, and fanfiction. The variety of ways that grassroots movements share their wisdom shows a history of mobilisation of knowledge. When grassroots movements are deciding to put their effort into a means of mobilization, do they know what is most effective?

Knowledge mobilization is a process that has been developing in academic spaces. It was started to address the long history of research having difficulties getting it to the people who can implement it (Brown & Duguid, 2000; Nutley, Walter, & Davies, 2007). Knowledge mobilisation (KMb) is designed to help with sharing information (Phipps, Jensen, & Myers, 2012). The KMb field uses a variety of tools to assist in moving knowledge to people who can use it (Cooper & Shewchuk, 2015).

Knowledge mobilization units are spaces in academic institutions where researchers, and community members, can get support for developing and implementing KMb plans. KMb plans detail the process that will ensure information reaches people who can use it. Within this process is a tool that can be used to finding the best ways to mobilise knowledge to specific groups. Thus, I wonder how KMb units could help grassroots movements make decisions about the routes that will be used to share their wisdom with the general population, politicians, and alternative and mainstream media.

2. Methodology

To explore how KMb units can assist grassroots movements in sharing their goals and wisdom with a broader audience I will complete a case study of the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University (YU). I have selected this KMb unit because the YU KMb unit also houses ResearchImpact (“York University” 2016). ResearchImpact is a national organisation that brings KMb units and KM professionals together (“About ResearchImpact,” 2016). Because of its role, ResearchImpact can influence how KMb units at different academic institutions run. Thus, exploring the YU KMb unit, with its integrated connection to ResearchImpact, is more likely to reflect the aims of KMb units throughout Canada (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

This instrumental case study was customised to address the question of how KMb units can help grassroots movements make decisions about the routes that will be used to share their wisdom with the general population, politicians, and alternative and mainstream media (Luck, Jackson, & Usher, 2007). The case study includes a textual analysis and a systematic literature review (Leavy, 2014; Yin, 2009). The textual analysis will review services, collaborations, and aims of the YU KMb unit. A total of 23 text sources were included. Sources come from four websites, eight social media sites, two media articles, five randomly selected Research Snapshots and four peer-reviewed articles that are written by a full-time worker and address KMb or the unit.

The systematic literature review aims to explore collaborations between researchers and grassroots movements. I conducted the systematic literature review between January and February 2016. I searched six journal databases, the York Library, Google Scholar, and Google. Some of the keywords were knowledge mobilisation, knowledge transfer, sharing knowledge, community collaboration, and grassroots movements. Over 100 sources were found. I kept 56 sources after giving preference to Canadian sources, sources from marginalised communities and eliminating sources not connected to KMb.

To address the presence of cultural norms and personal beliefs within the examination of the textual analysis and literature review, I developed a human rights framework. This framework was built around the work of Chadha & Sheldon (2005), Clapham (2015), Darian-Smith, (2010), Falk (2000), Fraser (2005), Nguyen (2015), Rawls, Stammers (2009), and Young (2011). This framework will help me to manage the cultural norms and personal beliefs that could impact the outcomes of the textual analysis and systematic literature review (McKee, 2003).

3. Results Summary

Based on the textual analysis a grassroots movements that connect with the KMb unit at YU can access the following services:

1. be introduced to KMb, learn information about services offered at the KMb unit at YU,
2. gain central details on how to develop and implement KMb plans,
3. network with other KMb professionals,
4. get answers to questions they have about KMb,
5. collaborating with a researcher to answer a question they have.

The systematic literature review shows a berth of details that grassroots movements could benefit from learning. These details range from describing the KMb process, theories and models of how KMb works, different ways to develop and use KMb plans, means of

collaboration, a variety of ways to share knowledge, tools to help knowledge uptake, and the beginnings of how to evaluate KMb projects.

4. Discussion

Details from the systematic literature review could help grassroots movements make decisions about how to spend their limited resources to reach an audience who can implement their wisdom. It does not appear that this is what grassroots movements would access from connecting with the YU KMb unit. The textual analysis does not display many services that focus on learning more than the basics about KMb.

How is anyone to access this KMb knowledge? This knowledge is not present in the services at the YU KMb unit. In fact, a means of sharing KMb knowledge lacks in the services of KMb units overall. Amanda Cooper and Samantha Shewchuk (2015) explored the services provided by a knowledge broker, a standard position in KMb units. Copper and Shewchuk (2015) found that knowledge brokers provide services that fall into eight categories. These categories are awareness, accessibility, engagement, organisational development, implementation support, capacity building, policy influence, and linkage & partnership (Cooper & Shewchuk, 2015, p. 3).¹ Unfortunately, these categories do not address the details available in the systematic literature review.

A grassroots movement could access some information about KMb by connecting with a KMb unit, but the limited details suggest little benefit for any user. However, there is information about KMb that would help grassroots organisations. The fact that there are details about KMb that could benefit users of a KMb unit but services do not provide access to them makes me question the offered services through KMb units.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I explored how a KMb unit might be of use for a grassroots movement. I did this through a case study of the KMb unit at YU. Through a textual analysis of the unit's website, paper publications, and their social media I found that the KMb unit services are lacking for grassroots movements, but also for academics. The lack of assistance became apparent when the vast amounts of KMb knowledge that was present in the systematic literature review. The knowledge created in the KMb literature on how to mobilise research and wisdom will be of great benefit to grassroots movements and academics.

The lack of KMb learning opportunities through KMb units hurts everyone who might engage with a KMb unit. It creates a small, select few, that have this knowledge about KMb. Making the need for KMb units necessary to mobilise information, knowledge, and wisdom. For people, academics or grassroots movements, to successfully use KMb they must have the details about KMb. If KMb units are going to instil KMb within academia and their community collaborators they must move past explaining why KMb is needed. KMb units have to develop ways to bring the practice of KMb into the work people do. They must help people to deepen

¹ For more details on what these services categories mean, please see the following paper: (Cooper & Shewchuk (2015). Knowledge brokers in education: How intermediary organisations are bridging the gap between research, policy and practice internationally. *education policy analysis archives*, 23:118, 1-8.

their understanding of KMb so it can be adapted to their projects (Brown & Duguid, 2000). I believe that if, or when, KMb unit begin a more in-depth KM learning process that grassroots movements would benefit from learning about KMb alongside academics and their community collaborators.

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