

Book Review: Mass Appeal: Communicating Policy Ideas in Multiple Media by Justin Gest

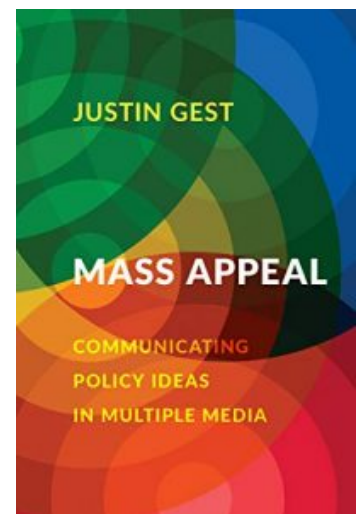
In Mass Appeal: Communicating Policy Ideas in Multiple Media, Justin Gest offers a guide for researchers who want to improve their ability to make a policy impact with their research, exploring the strengths and weaknesses of different media for communicating research ideas and their implications. This book is likely to be useful for researchers across the career spectrum, from PhD students to established scholars, writes Steven Hill, providing a tool kit to support researchers in countering increasing challenges to the authority of research knowledge and experts.

Mass Appeal: Communicating Policy Ideas in Multiple Media. Justin Gest. Oxford University Press. 2020.

Researchers with policy-relevant findings are often frustrated by the lack of uptake of their recommendations by policymakers, but the key message of *Mass Appeal* is that researchers can change this. They can increase their skills and maximise the chances of their research making a difference in the policy sphere. In opening the book, Justin Gest shares his own disappointment in completing a major research project with significant implications for policy, only to find that the findings received little attention outside the academy. On reflecting further, he realised that, as a former journalist, he had the skills needed to improve the potential impact of his research findings. The book was born out of this insight, and from a desire to help other researchers.

Mass Appeal is a guide for researchers who want to improve their ability to make a policy impact with their research. The focus is on understanding the strengths and weaknesses of different media for communicating research ideas and their implications, and on providing simple, straightforward and practical advice. The book is likely to be useful for researchers across the career spectrum, from PhD students to senior and established scholars. Even seasoned researchers can be novices in disseminating their findings persuasively into the world of policymaking.

Mass Appeal opens with an introductory chapter that focuses on good writing as an underpinning of all the communication media covered in the remainder of the book. Given that some of the later chapters cover verbal communication routes, some may argue with the centrality of writing, but I agree with Gest. Through writing with a specific audience in mind, arguments can be sharpened and so prepared for effective verbal communication.





Gest spends considerable time in this opening chapter explaining the idea of ‘topic sentences’ as the bedrock technique of persuasive writing. There is nothing especially novel or radical in the approach, but in my experience the technique is neither well-known nor used so the time is well-spent. Finally in this section, Gest covers the importance and challenges of editing to get to the core of the argument and insight. Perceptively, he recognises that editing can be a particular challenge for the academic expert:

experts are often far less able to be brutal in editing ideas down to their core. Due to a mix of self-absorption and myopia, we have spent too much time developing our memo, platform, or book to discard 99 percent of its content. We are too close to it to determine what is the most attractive element. (14)

Each of the following chapters concentrates on a single communication medium and is structured in the same way. First, there is a discussion of the principles of communicating through the medium in question, together with consideration of the audiences that can be reached. The second section provides advice from expert practitioners, specially commissioned and reproduced in their own words. Finally, each chapter closes with an example of good practice to illustrate the advice provided.

The structure is helpful in allowing quick access to tailored advice. The book can be read from cover to cover, but the chapters are stand-alone and suitable to use as reminders when a specific communication activity is being planned. Although there is inevitably some repetition between the introductory sections and the practitioner advice, this serves to emphasise and reinforce the key points. The examples of good practice are also useful, although they could have been enhanced with annotation to illustrate the points made earlier.

Moving from the longest to the shortest forms, there are chapters on executive summaries, press releases, op-eds and blog posts, briefings, broadcast appearances, elevator pitches as well as Twitter and other social media. The chapters are full of thoughtful advice from both Gest and the experts that he commissioned. Gest makes an interesting choice in combining writing op-eds for news publications with blog posts. The combination makes a strong point – that to be successful and compelling, blog posts need to adopt the practices of opinion-piece writing. They need a clear, compelling and straightforward argument, and a timeliness or relevance. This is such good advice.

The book has a very practical focus; Gest does not delve into theoretical or empirical questions relating to the links between research and policy. This choice makes the book both readable, and effective as a guide to communication. The risk in the focus is that readers might think that good communication is *sufficient* to achieve policy impact. Gest is clear that this is not the case, writing:

Ultimately, if your ideas are not meritorious, then effective communication merely postpones their inevitable failure. Stylish presentation is not a replacement for careful consideration, rigorous research, or calculated analysis. Equally so, and inversely, the merit of your ideas will likely remain unknown without effective communication skills. (119)

Readers should also bear in mind that there are many factors in addition to communication that are important for policy uptake. Research needs to speak to the questions that are currently relevant in the policy sphere. Without a degree of saliency, that is sometimes difficult for researchers to influence; it can be hard to gain traction. These and other challenges in the processes of evidence-based policymaking are synthesised in Justin Parkhurst's [The Politics of Evidence](#), which would make an excellent companion volume to *Mass Appeal*.

This book is a timely contribution, with the rise of 'fake news' and increasing challenges to the authority of research knowledge and experts. While there are many factors that contribute to these shifts, Gest stresses that researchers and experts have themselves added to the problem:

scientists, experts, and authorities played a role in making this world; and they have a role to play in unmaking it. Indeed, a principal reason for the indistinguishable nature of expertise is that we experts have done little to publicize our methods and ideas to the mainstream public and its decision makers. We assign value exclusively to the publication of scientifically derived facts in highly specialized journal publications, which are often written in a manner illegible to even an informed layperson and then hidden behind an intimidating pay-wall. We have so specialized into narrow subfields that we are unable to speak across them. The "death of expertise" has been one of self-inflicted wounds. (167)

In *Mass Appeal*, researchers have a tool kit to support them in countering these trends.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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