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Graphic novel: The superhero of research dissemination?

Blog Editor

by Dr Philip Brown

When the main output from a research project is essentially a report and a few lofty journal articles what does this mean for impact? Well, as researchers, we hope it means quite a lot. We hope that key policy makers and practitioners will read our work, understand what we found and act on our recommendations and conclusions to change or improve things. This is certainly something which happens, but possibly more rarely than we care to admit to ourselves. A cynic might say that churning out final research reports merely conforms to the well rehearsed process endemic within the research profession of telling people (anyone who will listen) how clever, unique, interesting our research has been. In reality, for the most part, we often speak to the 'usual suspects' add to a growing body of similar research reports and 'impact' is incremental as opposed to dramatic (sighs).

But it doesn't have to be this way.

As part of our [recent work](#) funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) into Multiple Excluded Homelessness we intended to draft and release a final report on the work, present at academic and practitioner conferences and write peer review papers. But we also wondered if there was more we could do.

What idea did we come up with? Why, a graphic novel style report of course! To be honest I can't actually remember why now, that's just the idea we went with. The idea was to take a selection of the narratives we had collected – our study explored the life-histories of homeless and vulnerable people – and present these as illustrations in a novel format. Trying to keep this in the University of Salford family we enlisted the help of a design graduate – Sam Dahl – who worked with us to try and realise our ideas. Sam helped us shape our message. He presented some initial story board samples based on some segments of the interviews we had transcribed. We were blown away. We began to condense the biographies of the people whose narrative we selected and Sam set to work in earnest.

The novel, [Somewhere Nowhere: Lives Without Homes](#), was self-published via an online publisher – LuLu – and a number of hard copies produced and given to agencies who made the research possible. When people have asked us why we decided to produce the novel people often appear surprised that it wasn't part of some grand master plan. Partly it came about as a result of the sense our Steering Group gave us about dissemination who were collectively tired of talking to the usual suspects, in the usual ways and failing to change much. Partly it was also boredom of having research outputs noted but rarely really noticed.

The reception to the novel has been overwhelming positive. Homeless people have complimented its production and those people who have long been embedded within the homelessness sector have been very supportive. People appear to be finding their own ways to use the material. Most talk about its use in schools to help explain homelessness and all its complexity. Others within the homelessness sector have talked about how their family members have become engaged with it which has led to new discoveries about the work they do and the issues they face.

How ever it is used it doesn't really matter. It's being used – and that's exactly what we wanted.

About the Author

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