



DEVELOPING EVALUATION AND
COMMUNICATION CAPACITY IN
INFORMATION SOCIETY RESEARCH



por los Derechos Civiles

INTEGRATING U-FE & RESCOM TO DEVELOP AN EVIDENCE-BASED COMMUNICATION PLAN

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CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Designing a basic communication plan – initial steps	3
Integrating U-FE early on: exploring possible EVALUATION uses and key questions	4
Foundations of the communication plan.....	5
Achievements & Products.....	5
Facilitation of use.....	7
Lessons	9
APPENDIX: Summary of communication strategy (As an example of the DECI-2 framework use).....	11

Introduction

Asociación por los Derechos Civiles (ADC) is an Argentinian NGO that seeks to contribute to establish a judicial and institutional culture that would guarantee the fundamental rights of people based on the values of the national constitution. In 2015, ADC created the Freedom of Expression and Privacy unit (FEP). Right after its creation, the unit's staff members became aware of the need to start a reflection process that would allow them to clarify and prioritize their goals and objectives. ADC came in contact with DECI-2 following a request from the Cyberstewards research network they belong to, that had already received mentoring from DECI-2 at the hub level. They saw that working in evaluation and communication with DECI-2 mentorship was a great opportunity because it responded to their need.

As expressed by one of the FEP team members, “we decided that having a basic communication plan would be very useful for our team because it would allow us to establish greater clarity about the objectives and the results of our communication strategies, especially about those seeking to influence public policy on digital rights. The idea of undertaking a U-FE process in parallel also caught our interest, and we decided to do it as a strategic learning initiative that would allow us to measure and improve the performance of our communication strategy.”

This case study summarizes the process, products and learnings that resulted from ADC's experience with Research Communication (ResCom) and Utilization-focused Evaluation (U-FE). The document is structured as follows: First, it describes the initial steps that were taken to help the FEP unit develop a basic communication plan. Second, it describes how the U-FE process was designed to support the communication plan and how U-FE and ResCom were integrated. Thirdly, it describes the main achievements and products. Lastly, it summarizes the main learnings from the mentor's perspective and provides some concluding remarks.

Designing a basic communication plan – initial steps

Given the short-term nature of the partnership, when the staff members of ADC's FEP unit and DECI-2 mentors met for the first time, they agreed that the scope of the mentorship had to focus on something very specific and practical. Accordingly, they also agreed that the ResCom mentorship would focus on helping the FEP unit develop a basic communication plan and the U-FE mentorship would focus on setting up a Developmental Evaluation (DE) process that would help them improve the communication plan on an on-going basis.

The first two steps to develop the communication plan were: (i) describing the nature of the work the FEP unit does; and (ii) identifying the key existing communication activities. This process enabled us to determine that most of the unit's work focuses on:

- Research on freedom of expression and privacy issues;
- Report writing; and
- Tracking and analyzing existing legislation.

Their key communication activities are:

- Disseminating their findings on their website (www.adcdigital.org.ar);
- Publishing & distributing their reports to various audiences;
- Disseminating findings and referencing their reports via social media;
- Organizing and/or participating in workshops.

The third step was identifying stakeholders that the FEP unit interacts with, both externally and internally (i.e. within ADC). The external stakeholders were classified into different groups.

Integrating U-FE early on: exploring possible EVALUATION uses and key questions

The FEP unit staff members were eager to learn about U-FE and its potential integration with their communication efforts. From the early stages of the conversation with DECI-2 mentors, they agreed that a practical way of doing such integration would be to implement U-FE to measure and improve the effectiveness of the communication plan on an on-going basis. Consequently, the FEP unit assigned one of their team members to be mentored as the evaluator who would facilitate the U-FE process as a developmental evaluation/strategic learning exercise. Given that organizational readiness was quite evident in terms of commitment, the evaluator proceeded to invite several internal stakeholders to participate as primary intended users (PIUs) of the evaluation. Three staff members of the FEP unit and the director of institutional relationships of ADC accepted the invitation and agreed to participate.

The evaluator facilitated a series of meetings with the PIUs that helped them agree on the purpose and intended uses of the evaluation:

- The main purpose of the U-FE process was to generate learning that would help the FEP unit develop or formulate a detailed communication plan and improve it as it is implemented.
- The primary intended USES were:
 1. To support decision-making regarding communication strategies ;
 2. To document and review all agreements that may emerge in order to sort and prioritize the communication strategies;
 3. To be able to explain FEP unit's needs and goals to a new staff member.
- Initially, the strategic learning process mainly focused on the FEP unit's website, where most of the publications and activities are posted.

Based on the above uses, the PIUs formulated the following key evaluation questions:

1. **What effects do our communication products have?** To what extent does our intended audience find our work useful? To what extent do they like our publications?
2. **At what level are we influencing?** In other words, how many and what type of people do our communication products reach? To what extent do we influence our audiences?

Foundations of the communication plan

One of the great advantages that the FEP unit had for integrating ResCom and U-FE was that most of the PIUs of the evaluation were also heavily involved in the unit's communication activities. Therefore, reflecting on the potential uses and the key questions of the evaluation also helped them identify the communication purposes and objectives. The DECI-2 mentor helped the FEP unit formulate the following general communication purposes and objectives.

General Communication Purposes

1. *To raise awareness, promote dialogue and inform.*
2. *To gain visibility.*
3. *To advocate.*

Communication objectives

1. *To influence policy-makers and the national legislative agenda.*
2. *To be present in the international agenda.*
3. *To make ADC a well-known institution at the regional level.*

After defining the communication purposes and objectives, the next steps were: (i) to list the unit's most commonly used media; (ii) to identify stakeholders and target audiences; (iii) to reflect on how these two factors relate to each other and to the communication purposes earlier defined (see Table 1 as example - not actual data).

Table 1: Example of audiences, media and objectives

STAKEHOLDERS/ AUDIENCES	PREFERRED MEDIA*	OBJECTIVES
International networks	Workshops.	Strengthen our collaboration.
Academic sector	Website, reports	Strengthen our collaboration.
Government – policy-makers	workshops, reports	Promote practices of interest.
Media	Direct contact with journalists	Get the media to talk about specific issues.

Achievements & Products

The ADC staff members who participated in defining the foundational elements of the communication plan and in the U-FE planning steps, acknowledged several benefits of engaging in the process:

According to the evaluator, *“such a process created a space for reflection and discussion about important aspects of our communication practice. These conversations allowed us to know and*

understand many assumptions that had not been made explicit to all the team members. It also made us aware of the importance of having a communication strategy for our work and to agree on its essential elements. The PIUs said that the U-FE strategic learning process was very useful to reflect on the FEP unit's objectives and goals." The participants mentioned that the reflection process also helped:

1. Discuss, clarify and prioritize goals and objectives, which was helpful given the rapidly changing political context in Argentina. Putting the objectives in writing allowed all team members to be on the same page.
2. Make arrangements to establish a new position that would exclusively work on implementing the communication plan of the FEP unit and coordinate efforts with the general communication department of ADC.
3. Reflect on how to measure the effectiveness of our efforts, especially those related to the dissemination of our publications via the FEP unit's website. The PIU's talked about the importance of having reliable, cost-effective and ethical measurement methods. Regarding this last point, they concluded that the FEP unit had to be consistent with the institutional values that ADC promotes. Therefore, they agreed that they would use analytics tracking tools that would respect the privacy and identity of the website visitors. The discussions also helped the PIUs realize that the unit's website had no *Terms and Conditions* section, which is something very important from a legal standpoint as a way to demonstrate the values that ADC promotes.
4. Become aware of the fact that there are many qualitative results and that the FEP unit needs to be more attentive to identify and document them. One example that helps illustrate this, for instance, is tracking how the FEP unit's publications are used and referenced by other researchers.
5. Come up with relevant criteria to include in the job description of the communication person who would be in charge of implementing the communication plan.

In terms of products, ADC was left with a final document that outlines the basic elements of the communication plan for the FEP unit and describes how to assess and improve its effectiveness. The document provides a summary of the initial communication plan using a template that the DEC-2 team has used with several partners (see Appendix - Figure 1). The document also contains a series of tables that illustrate how the key evaluation questions relate to the communication purposes and how the performance of future communication strategies could be measured. It also provides examples of data that can be collected in order to respond to the evaluation questions. Lastly, the document provides practical ideas on how ADC's FEP unit can implement the communication plan and use U-FE to improve it on an on-going basis.

Facilitation of use

The DECI-2 mentorship ended before the evaluation yielded any findings. So there could not be any facilitation of evaluation findings use. However, one could say that there was facilitation of use of the learning process. The resulting document suggests specific steps that can be taken for future implementation of the communication plan and the U-FE system. Such steps include: reviewing and discussing the final document with the PIU's; sharing it with other ADC units; establishing periodical meetings with ADC staff to discuss results and methods for measuring effectiveness; etc. Some of these action steps were taken four months after the document was completed. The evaluator described her facilitation of use experience as follows:

“The final document was disseminated among ADC’s staff and received interesting suggestions and comments that allowed some changes into the strategic plan for 2017. At the beginning of the year, the director of FEP unit organized a 1-day meeting to review our work and the growth that we achieved in 2016. We were all fresh returning from the holidays, so it was a good moment for looking back and reflecting. All the PIUs attended the meeting, including the director of another unit of ADC. The meeting addressed all the projects that were done throughout 2016, so it cannot be said that was strictly to discuss the U-FE process. However, as we already had the reflective experience that we had acquired from working in U-FE, we were able to design the event along a set of objectives. The meeting was a success because it gave the PIUs the opportunity to share all the achievements, doubts, mistakes, and new ideas that had been emerging but had not been discussed. We observed that some of these ideas could be included in a new strategic plan. It’s important to remark that this was the first meeting of this kind held in many years, and it was really significant for all participating staff members of ADC’s FEP unit.

As we reflected on our work, with particular emphasis on 2016, we realized that what we do in fact goes beyond ‘Freedom of expression & Privacy’ as themes. While we realized that our work on human rights includes digital rights, we also concluded that our work and planning should not be boxed into “freedom of expression and privacy” alone. As a result, we decided to re-structure ADC’s FEP unit and began a reflection process to rename our theme areas, and possibly to move beyond theme ‘areas’ as such to allow us to find new ways of organizing what we do and how we do our work. This would not have been possible had we not done U-FE. We can truly say that, beyond the challenge of finding time to meet more often with the PIU’s, the notion of reflecting on a strategic plan was a key moment for us, and one that, of course, is immensely valued.

During the meeting, the PIU’s team had the opportunity to speak not only about ADC’s achievements and new goals, but also about what he had learned about communication strategy. 2016 was a year that gave PIU’s the chance to learn

valuable lessons regarding communication, and the U-FE process was a key factor for that. For instance, due to the time pressures, we learned about the importance of being clear about the organizational goals and objectives, and of having a communication strategy that reflects them. This was in fact, demonstrated by the growth in both our site “adcdigital” and our team. As a result, the whole team confirmed a commitment to our mission. One of our objectives for 2017 is to keep growing in this particular domain. Communication will likely be taken into account as we modify the FEP unit’s structure.

Thanks to this meeting, the PIU’s were able to organize meetings with other members of ADC who could improve their perspective of organizational growth. The PIU’s meeting particularly caught the attention of ADC’s Executive Director, who invited us for a second meeting at his cottage in order to reflect on 2016 and to plan for 2017 (including a communication strategy). The meeting was very valuable as it allowed us to have a first strategy meeting with an ADC staff member who was not a primary user. In addition, this allowed us to review absolutely all of the projects that had been finalized as well as those in the pipeline. This was a welcome surprise for the Executive Director, who asked us to help him organize a meeting with the Board of Directors of ADC in March, 2017. The purpose of such meeting was to bring the Board up to speed, and to gather their inputs – as they are well recognized Argentinian academics.”

According to the Director of the FEP unit, the U-FE process played a crucial role that went beyond yielding evaluation findings:

“I suspected the DECI-2 support could be valuable when I first heard about it at a Citizen Lab meeting in Jordan (2015), and I was able to confirm it when we had the first face-to-face meeting with the DECI-2 mentors in our office. At the time, we had recently hired our staff and we were trying to consolidate the new team in the midst of a difficult situation as the organization had just suffered major funding cuts and had lost some of his key leaders. For us, the U-FE process was crucial because it gave us tools that helped us think as a team and provided a very much needed moment of reflection. The DECI-2 mentorship came at the perfect time and knowing that the mentor was there gave us the confidence we required.

Our unit had such an enormous growth through 2016 that it would have been very easy to lose sight of what we were trying to accomplish, but the U-FE process became our guide. For instance, the table we made to identify our target audiences and our communication objectives with each of them, helped us to be very intentional and strategic at achieving such objectives, especially when it came to influencing the different government and non-government sectors that make up the digital ecosystem. It’s not that we looked at it every day, but we had a sense of

ownership and awareness. In this regard, we have seen concrete results. For example, we participated at the public enquiry that was done to modify the existing law on the protection of personal data and government officials took some of our inputs. We were the only organization from civil society that achieved something like this.

The evaluator was quite proactive at sharing the final document that we produced at the end of the DECI-2 mentorship. This allowed us to show the other units of ADC how we work and our reasoning behind our work. This is what caught the attention of the Executive Director and motivated him to become involved in our reflection meeting at the beginning of the year. Out of his own initiative, he asked us if he could come to the second day of our meeting. He was quite impressed by the reflection process we had gone through. We would be definitely interested in working with DECI again if there is a future opportunity.”

Lessons

The mentorship experience with ADC was interesting from different perspectives. First of all, it showed that it is possible to integrate – at least conceptually – U-FE and ResCom in real life, and that such an integration can bring value to certain organizations. This experience was something significantly different from previous DECI-2 experiences in Latin America that focused primarily on U-FE.

Second, it is worthwhile noting that although the FEP unit at ADC demonstrated a high level of organizational and individual readiness to undertake the ResCom planning phase and the U-FE design steps in a detailed manner, the implementation was not reached by the end of mentorship agreement. This suggests that in some cases, reaching readiness is not enough, and that there may be an implicit element beyond readiness that one could call “implementation capacity”. In the case of ADC, the readiness level was assessed almost as excellent, but the implementation capacity became a limiting factor that could not be resolved within the expected timeframe due to the lack of available staff and the limited project duration (as part of the Cyberstewards project).

The observed lack of implementation capacity confirms the difficulties that had been observed in previous DECI-2 mentorship experiences with small organizations that have already overbooked staff. However, this challenge does not mean that the effort was in vain, it just means that perhaps as mentors we need to better manage the expectations in terms of the products and immediate results that can be attained at the end of the mentorship period. When working with small organizations, perhaps one could propose deliverables along the lines of the document produced with ADC, which has the potential of becoming a roadmap for future action. So it’s more about planting a seed than seeing something germinate in the short term. This is exactly what happened with ADC. The DECI-2 mentoring process formally ended in September 2016 with the revision of the final document. A follow-up done six months later (March/2017) revealed that

the document was reviewed and discussed within the organization and that the learning process was so enriching that it caught the attention of the Executive Director and provided inputs that became part of the strategic plan for 2017.

As a research project, DECI-2 has highlighted the criticality of organizational readiness for U-FE and ResCom mentorship to be effective. However, the ADC experience suggests that timely facilitation of use can be as critical as readiness when it comes to determining the effectiveness of U-FE. As the PIU's reflected back on their U-FE experience and shared their insights, they were able to become more strategic and influence the entire organization. In this regard, it can be said that timely facilitation of use is essential for nurturing reflective capacity within an organization.

Another important lesson learned about facilitation of use is that it can happen even if there are no actual evaluation findings. In the ADC case, the U-FE process didn't reach the implementation stage, so there were no findings. However, sharing the reflection process that was done to design the evaluation system and facilitating the use of whatever was learned from it, was important enough to trigger changes within the organization.

Often, as UF-evaluators, we tend to think that unless we cover the 12 steps in a more or less rigorous way, the U-FE process cannot make a meaningful contribution. However, ADC's experience suggests that if a committed evaluator helps an organization thoughtfully cover at least some of the U-FE steps, the process can be very valuable for organizational learning. It is also important to note that U-FE provides important reflection tools that can be picked up by anyone who participates in the process, and not just by the person who acts as evaluator. In this case, the director of the FEP unit acknowledged that participating in the reflection process as PIU gave her tools to facilitate discussions within her team.

The right timing can also be a key success factor. The FEP unit of ADC had access to DECI-2 mentorship at a critical moment as they were consolidating themselves as a team and were starting to work on new projects. Perhaps the same mentorship would not have had the same results if it had been offered later on. This observation is consistent with the idea that U-FE works best when it starts in the early stages of a project or program.

Another observation that deserves attention is the importance of the managers' commitment to support U-FE throughout its entire cycle. In this case, the program manager was very supportive of the process and was fully engaged as a PIU. Furthermore, she saw the DECI-2 mentorship as a growth opportunity for her staff member, allowing her to invest enough time in the learning process and valuing her contributions. This kind of support was seen as essential for the U-FE process to generate value and permeate organizational culture within ADC.

APPENDIX: Summary of communication strategy (As an example of the DECI-2 framework use)

COMMUNICATION PURPOSES

- Raising awareness, promoting dialogue and informing.
- Advocacy.

ACTORS & AUDIENCES

- National and international networks
- Academic sector
- Government
- National media

COMMUNICATION OBJECTIVES

1. *To influence policy-makers and the national legislative agenda.*
2. *To be present in the international agenda.*
3. *To make ADC a well-known institution at the regional level.*

METHODS & MEDIA

- Website
- Workshops
- Papers & reports
- Public events

OUTCOME MEASUREMENT

ANALYTICS → WEBSITE, FACEBOOK, TWITTER.
DIALOGUE WITH NON-EXPERT AUDIENCE
TRACKING PUBLICATIONS