The message box

Communicating Research: THE MESSAGE BOX

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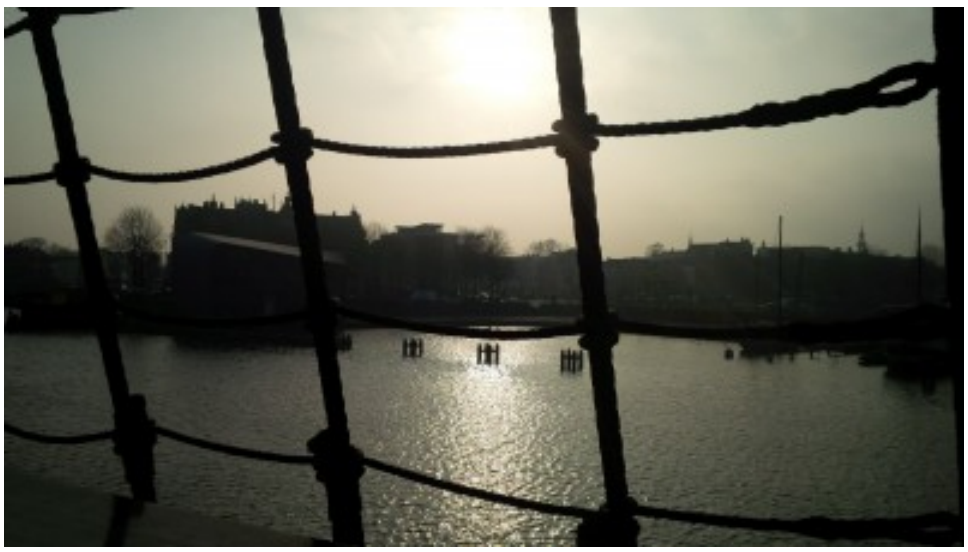
The outcomes of research can be complicated, caveated and difficult to explain to those from a non-scientific or non-academic background.

Yet engaging stakeholders within industry, government and beyond is often crucial to the research method, and *always* essential to the uptake of findings in wider society.



Successful communication of research is therefore important, nowhere more so than in participatory research.

The **Message Box** can be used to distil essential information from both ongoing and completed research, to engage individuals whose contribution is vital, yet hail from a different backgrounds, science-based or otherwise.

The tool works by encouraging researchers to clarify their thinking about the main issue that their work addresses, and importantly, the relevance of their work to those they are wishing to communicate with.

Researchers can then use the Message Box to condense the crux of their work into five to six sentences with which researchers can explain the problem, potential solutions and how their work relates to their audience.

The resulting set of concise messages can be disseminated using channels appropriate for the end user, ranging from social media, to newspapers, to policy briefings and events.

It is worth noting that where participatory research actions are established (i.e. where the object and activities are defined and shared with other stakeholders) the tool should be jointly applied.

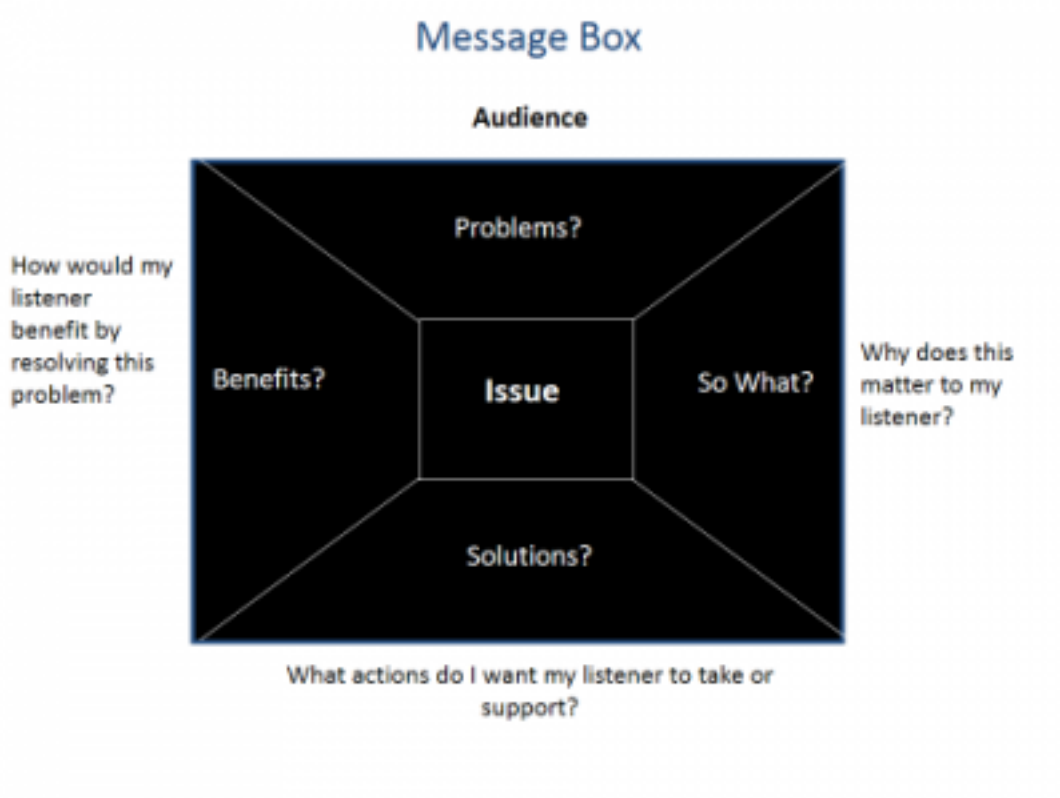
Expected Outcomes

If researchers can successfully communicate their aims, their need for input and engagement, their progress and interim and final results, their research (participatory or otherwise) will improve. Improvements may include:

- Increased engagement, throughout the entire timeline of the project, with stakeholders. In the case of GAP2, this would mean the greater involvement of fishers, scientists and policy makers in all aspects of the project, from deciding which research issues should be addressed to understanding how final results may affect policy and fishing practices.
- A sense of 'community' in relation to the project and its partners, brought about through effective discussion and dissemination of shared goals, consistent branding and messaging, and regular, positive updates (through a variety of fora) on the project's progress.
- Increased uptake and implementation of the research's findings by stakeholders.

Increased uptake and implementation of the research's values by other academics. This can create further opportunities, both within and beyond the initial research, for a broader community of participants (e.g. GAP2 exchange program).

What is needed



To use the message box:

- Identify the audience that you're interested in communicating with. Write this outside the box, so that it remains at the forefront of your mind.
- Next, identify the issue that your work addresses.
- Consider the main problem/conflict brought about by this issue.
- How does this problem affect your listener? If the problem is not resolved, what will the fallout be for your audience? In short – why should your listener care?
- Identify the solutions which would solve the problem, and in particular which solutions can be acted upon by your audience. What would you ask your listener to do to play their part in solving the problem?
- If your listener carried out the actions you desired, how would they benefit in both the short, medium and long term?
- Write down your answers to each of the questions above in the relevant box. At this stage, your written answers may be quite lengthy. This is normal.
- Try to condense the contents of each box into one or two sentences. Make sure that these sentences are written in a language and style appropriate to your audience.

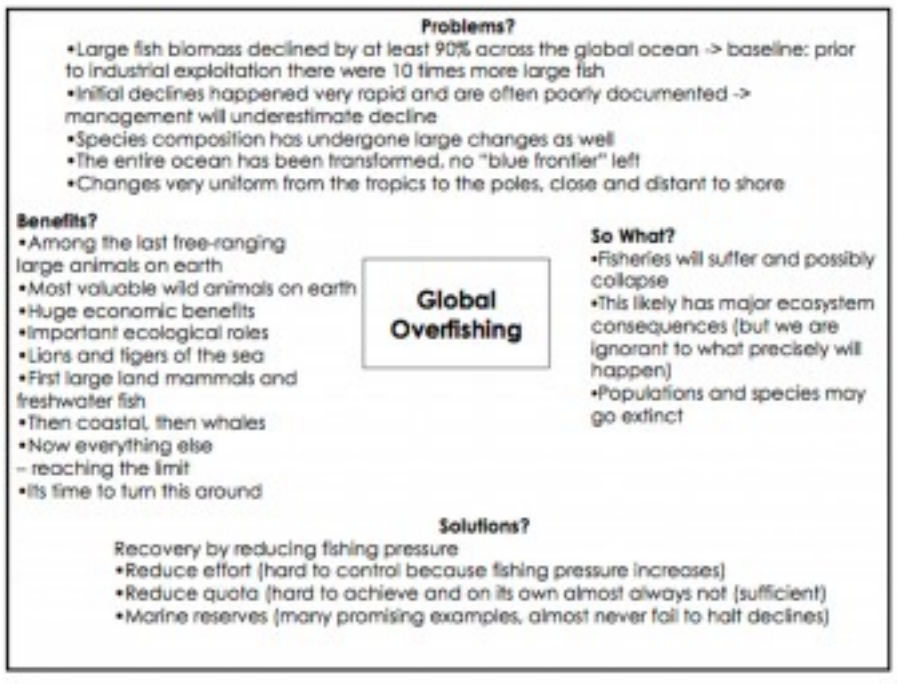
- The result is your set of communication messages, ready to be deployed throughout a number of communication media.

In order to use the Message Box to its full advantage you will need:

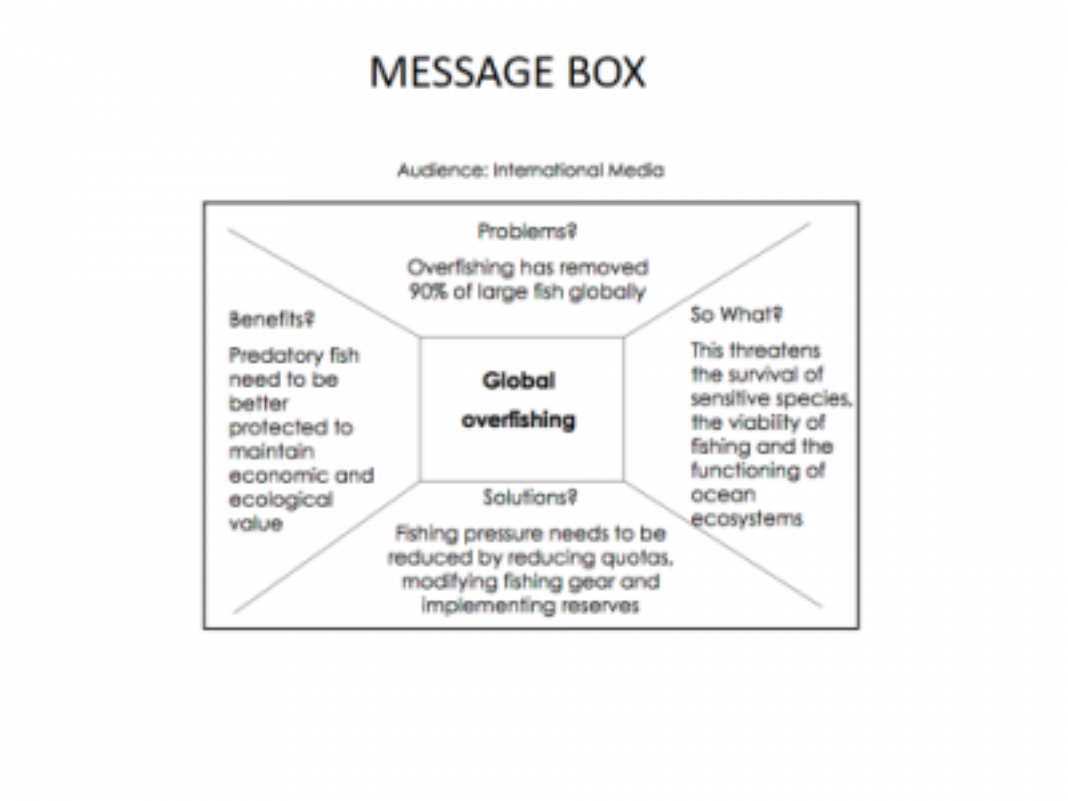
- Clear knowledge of research topic and participants
- Supplementary anecdotes, statistics, phrases and sound bites that can reinforce the message.

How it works

Below is an example of how a piece of scientific research published in a journal article (Ransom Myers & Boris Worm 2003) was communicated through using the message box. The message box technique helped to clarify and condense the key points of the research – lending further impact to already stark statistics.



The initial set of messages is a strong start in breaking down the most important findings of the research. This was then further condensed to ensure a simple message with the most possible impact for communication with the press.



The scientific research has now been converted into a message with universal significance, which any one from any background can access and understand.

Warnings

- Identifying target audience and keeping them in mind is crucial.
- When drafting messages, don't worry about the exact wording in the first instance.
- Avoid jargon and technical terms. Use simple language.
- Remember that this is a continued process: keep working on it, keep refining it as research continues.
- Keep messages as short as possible.
- On using the end set of messages, be careful about the medium used. As different messages are relevant to different audiences, so are different mediums. For example, a local newspaper would be a good way to communicate with a fishermen, but not a policy maker located in Brussels.

Examples from GAP2 and beyond

- All GAP2 case study leaders have been trained in the Message Box technique and its use across GAP2, as part of a communications

workshop held during the project. The workshop was designed to show the relevance and importance of communications to participatory research, and disseminating key findings from the GAP2 case studies around Europe. During the workshop, each case study leader applied the message box to their own work for a selected audience.

- The Message Box has also been used consistently across GAP2 central communications: helping to condense stories for posting on the website, and informing social media content to ensure maximum reach and impact.

- See an example of Lotte Worsøe Clausen's (a GAP2 scientist) use of the Message Box tool here: http://gap2.eu/gap2wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/GAP-2-herring-case-study-message-box-and-use.pptx

What people say about this tool

'The Message Box tool really helped me organize my thoughts and produce a clear, easily accessible set of messages to communicate the research being undertaken in my GAP2 case study' – Lotte Worsøe Clausen, GAP2 Scientist.

'The message box technique has really informed how the GAP2 project as a whole thinks about communicating the good work being doing across Europe, including fishers, scientists and policy-makers. It helps to condense complex ideas into messages with reach and impact' – Dr Steven Mackinson, GAP2 Coordinator.

References and resources

Personal communication with Kristian Teleki, Vice-President of SeaWeb in June 2012.

Myers & Worm (2003). *Rapid worldwide depletion of predatory fish communities*. Nature,423:280-283, 15 May 2003.

Web resources

Other ‘message box’ approaches:

http://suzannehawkes.com/2010/05/04/the-power-of-the-message-box/

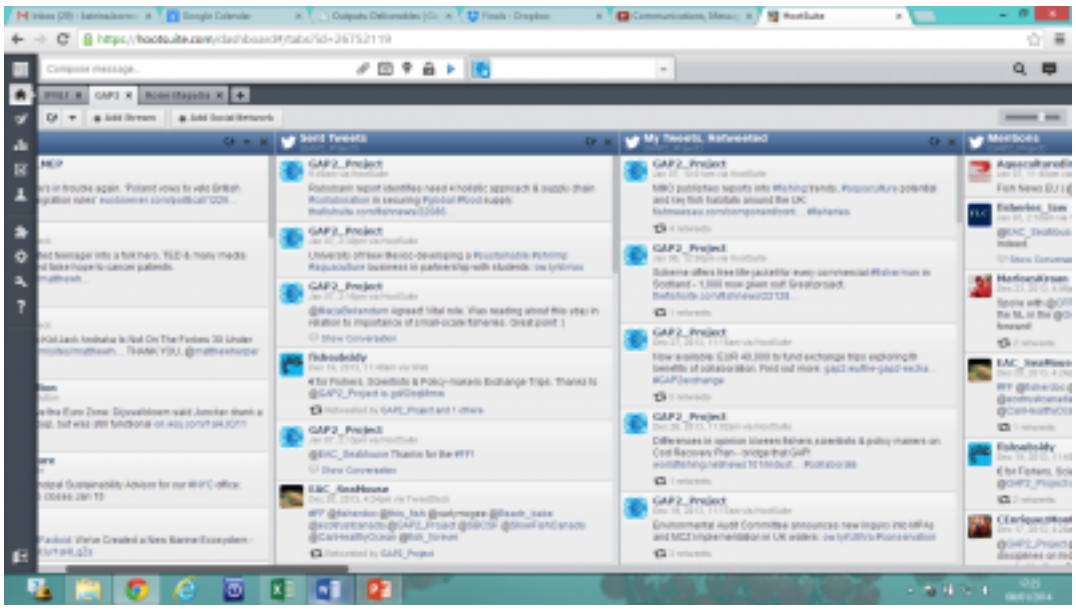
http://www.emeraldstrategies.net/buzz/articles/2008/200802-campaign-message-box-how-to.htm

GAP2 website:

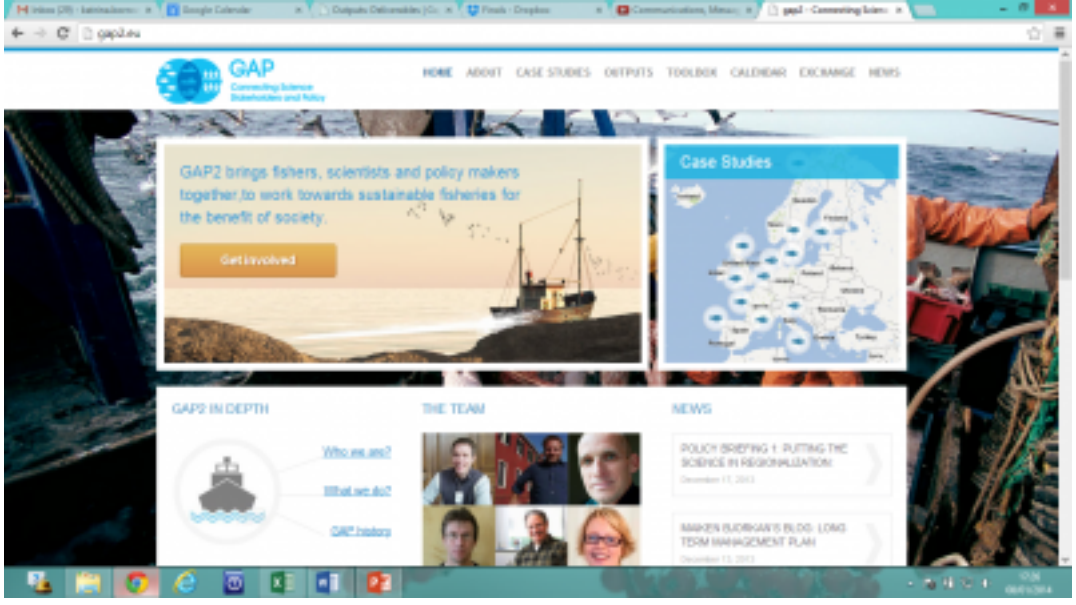
www.gap2.eu

Myers & Worm (2003) article on decline of predatory fish:
http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v423/n6937/abs/nature01610.html

Visual references and resources



GAP2 Twitter account, engaging relevant audiences



A snapshot of the GAP2 website's home page, designed to engage policy makers, scientists and fishermen.