

---

# Knowledge Mobilization as Design: The Case of the Canadian Homelessness Research Network<sup>1</sup>

Scholarly and Research  
Communication

VOLUME 5 / ISSUE 3 / 2014

Stephen Gaetz  
*York University*

## Abstract

The Canadian Homelessness Research Network (CHRN) was established to create a stronger link between homelessness research, policy, and practice. The knowledge mobilization strategy of the CHRN encompasses engaged scholarship, networking, and innovative dissemination practices. Part of the learning of the CHRN has been the need to reimagine and redefine the traditional relationship between content creation and dissemination. Using a “design thinking” perspective, the CHRN has nurtured a practice that integrates collaborative processes of knowledge and content development with a more assertive involvement in different aspects of publishing (and modes of publication), including graphic design, marketing, communications, and dissemination, with the goal of increasing the impact of research. This article explores this shift, using examples of work the CHRN produced and disseminated through the Homeless Hub.

**Stephen Gaetz** is Professor in the Faculty of Education at York University and the Director of the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness. Email: [sgaetz@yorku.ca](mailto:sgaetz@yorku.ca).

## Keywords

Canadian Homelessness Research Network (CHRN); Homelessness; Knowledge mobilization; Design; Research dissemination; Social media

## Introduction

In addressing complex problems such as homelessness, a key challenge is how to foster a stronger link between research, policy, and practice. When homelessness emerged as a highly visible and seemingly intransigent problem in Canada in the 1990s, the first response was to build a robust and charity-based emergency response that, while

CCSP Press

*Scholarly and Research Communication*

Volume 5, Issue 3, Article ID 0301163, 16 pages

Journal URL: [www.src-online.ca](http://www.src-online.ca)

Received February 11, 2014, Accepted September 6, 2014, Published October 2, 2014

Gaetz, Stephen. (2014). Knowledge Mobilization as Design: The Case of the Canadian Homelessness Research Network. *Scholarly and Research Communication*, 5(2): 0201163, 16 pp.

© 2014 Stephen Gaetz. This Open Access article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/ca>), which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

perhaps ameliorating the worst effects on individuals, did not address root causes or help reduce the problem itself (Gaetz, 2010). In the early years of the crisis, there was a strong anti-intellectualism and disdain for research voiced by many engaged in the struggle to address homelessness, a common refrain being: “We don’t need research, we know what the problem is, and we know what the solution is.” The gap between research(ers) and the community was quite significant indeed.

Since those early days a shift has taken place in that research is now contributing to the development of effective solutions to homelessness. In this regard, the Canadian Homelessness Research Network<sup>2</sup> (CHRN) has played an important role in knowledge mobilization, which here encompasses engaged scholarship, networking, and innovative dissemination practices. Central to the approach of the CHRN has been the application of “design thinking” to its knowledge mobilization work.<sup>3</sup> Design thinking is an emerging approach to responding to problems in a broad range of fields. “Design thinking is now something that has traversed whatever discipline it was originally rooted in – which seems to be science, design, architecture, and marketing all at the same time” (Norman, 2013). For researchers, design thinking is a situated practice of collaborative knowledge and content development that involves a more assertive engagement with different aspects of publishing (and modes of publication), with the ultimate goal of increasing access to and the impact of research.

Why is design thinking important? The problem the CHRN has been trying to solve is how to make research more readily accessible, understandable, useable, and relevant to interested individuals, groups, and institutions working to generate effective solutions to homelessness. From a knowledge mobilization perspective, research impact is impeded by the limitations of conventional mechanisms of knowledge dissemination by researchers; by barriers to utilization by potential users (decision makers, practitioners, and advocates); and, significantly, by the lack of engagement between these different worlds (Armstrong & Alsop, 2010; Davies & Powell, 2011; Nutley, Walter, & Davies, 2007; Walter, Nutley, & Davies, 2003). Utilizing design thinking means a more productive and engaged interaction between researchers and users (Spaapen & van Drooge, 2011), and a shift from traditional means of disseminating academic work to an integrated approach allowing for greater control over the mechanisms of publication and distribution, including the creation of variable research outputs, inclusion of graphic design elements, and an engaged marketing and communications strategy.

### **The dissemination of academic research: A model in need of an update**

In the natural sciences, professions, and medical sciences, there is a long history of applying the knowledge generated by researchers to the development of practical solutions, a process often defined in terms of knowledge dissemination or transfer. In the social sciences, there is without a doubt a rich, deep, and varied history of community-engaged scholarship involving collaboration between researchers and different users of knowledge. However, the knowledge of how to mobilize research for a greater impact on policy and practice is not as well understood for conceptual, methodological, and historical reasons (Davies, Nutley, & Walter, 2005; Davies & Powell, 2010; Nutley et al., 2007).

The main tools of knowledge dissemination for social science researchers continue to be publication of scholarly books and peer reviewed articles as well as presentations at scholarly conferences. As researchers, we are taught the value of publishing in particular venues, the expectations of peer reviewers, guidelines for presentation of research, the language of disciplines, etc. We understand the hierarchy of academic journals and publishing houses, and prepare our work thoughtfully and accordingly, selecting venues for submission based on their prestige and the intended academic audience we wish to reach. This is what we are trained to do, and if successful, this is what we are rewarded for.

In this process, researchers invariably come to see their role as the creator of content, and the actual publication and dissemination of this content as work handled by someone else. Once their work is accepted for publication, academic researchers “let go,” and the journal/book publishers become responsible for graphic design, typesetting, distribution, and marketing with no real input by the producer of the content. If a credo of modernist design is that form follows function, the look of articles in academic journals has become highly standardized and formalized – one can tell at a fair distance that the final product is an academic article. In the social sciences, the intended audience is generally other scholars (including students), and the style adopted is intended to convey academic integrity.

The strengths of this system are readily acknowledged – rigorous peer review is a foundational feature of the scientific method and a means of ensuring that the research disseminated is of a high standard, and university libraries archive these materials for use by scholars. This is how we reliably build a knowledge base.

At the same time, there are profound limitations to this model that create barriers to access for non-academic audiences. The process through which research projects are conceived and executed often means that potential end users in the world of policy and practice are left out of the conversation, and research outputs are not always seen as relevant to them, or as answering the questions that are of interest to them. The use of technical language, the required knowledge to interpret research, and the structure of academic writing and research outputs (papers, reports, books) puts academic research out of reach for many audiences.

Complicating matters further are copyright restrictions that clearly limit access, a situation not unrelated to how the academic publishing industry is organized and controlled. Since the 1960s, large private communications companies have purchased many top academic journals and book publishing companies, and these companies now control the market. By the turn of the century, three private companies accounted for 42% of all academic articles published (Morgan Stanley Research, 2002). For researchers as well as scholarly societies, partnering with such companies may be seen as a way to relieve the administrative burden of publishing, printing, and distribution. For the commercial publishers, academic publications have been an attractive investment in spite of the relatively small circulation because both the content and peer review is more or less free (McGuigan & Russell, 2008). In pursuit of profit, such communications companies have aggressively acted to protect their copyright, and steady price increases over the past several decades have created something of a “crisis”

for university libraries (Chressanthis & Cressanthis, 1993; Edwards & Shulenburger, 2003; McGuigan & Russell, 2008). Subscriptions for journals, for instance, account for 65% of university library budgets in the UK (Monbiot, 2011). As a result of rising costs, many libraries have had to drop journals.

One of the outcomes of these shifts has been the search for innovative approaches to knowledge dissemination, and the demand in many quarters for more open access publishing, the rationale being that far from being “free,” the research content claimed (and copyrighted) by communications companies is often paid for by taxpayers through government funded granting agencies. In some countries, funding councils now have an open access mandate requiring academics to publish in such journals, but because of active lobbying and resistance by communications companies, the practice is not yet broadly accepted.

However, even in a context where open access becomes standard, it is not necessarily inevitable that the characteristic split between content production (the researcher), the dissemination of product (the publisher), and the utilization of research (the user) will be revolutionized. While technological innovation has most certainly resulted in new ways of receiving and viewing publications, the actual form of academic research has not been significantly altered. In terms of structure, graphic design, and layout, contemporary journal articles are not dramatically different from those published in the 1940s or 1950s, and the content itself has not necessarily become any more accessible to non-academic audiences (in terms of language, presentation, and style). So while other forms of media – film, television, magazines, newspapers, comics, etc. – have continued to evolve since that time, the advent of web-based publication and distribution (including “open access”) has not much altered the way we publish and present academic work, nor has it necessarily broadened readership beyond academia.

### **The researcher as designer**

Scholarship on the impact of research consistently identifies challenges to mobilizing social science research, including divergent and sometimes conflicting institutional cultures, goals, processes, and practices, and in some cases a lack of understanding of the role of evidence in policy development and program planning (Amara, Ouimet, & Landry, 2004; Davies et al., 2005; Spaapen & van Drooge, 2011). An effective approach to knowledge mobilization must not only seek to reimagine how research content is produced and distributed, but must also address the barriers that users face in accessing and utilizing research knowledge, including lack of time, resources, skills, organizational support, and the perception that research is not valuable, timely, or relevant (Estabrooks, Floyd, Scott-Findlay, O’Leary, & Gushta, 2003; Walter et al., 2003). This is where design thinking may have something to contribute to our understanding of effective knowledge mobilization practices.

In the field of graphic design, there have been ongoing debates about the impact of technology and how this has led to shifts in thinking about the relationship between the producer of content, the designer, and the user.

In the traditional model, the designer tries to interpret what given elements are “supposed to do” together. So what happens with computers (beyond the primitive

desktop publishing model)? On the “information highway” all sorts of things are up for grabs – authorship, how people read, gather and generate material for their own purposes. (Muriel Cooper, as quoted in Lupton, 1998, p. 12)

In the face of blurring boundaries between knowledge producer, graphic designer, and publisher, the slogan “designer as author” emerged in the 1990s, suggesting a new kind of agency and a creative role extending beyond that of technical practitioners serving clients to, in a sense, “becoming one’s own client” (Heller, 2011, p. 33). Ellen Lupton (1998) further proposed the concept of “designer as producer,” expanding the notion to include not only graphic design and content creation, but also control over the broader process of production itself. Recognizing a potential political impact to such a configuration, she posited that, “the techniques of manufacture (are seen) not as neutral, transparent means to an end but as devices equipped with cultural meaning and aesthetic character” (p. 159). Here she builds on the work of Walter Benjamin (1970), who in the 1930s was interested in interrogating “the relationship of a work of art to the relationships of production” (p. 2). Benjamin felt that changing media technology offered an opportunity to transform the relationship between the artist or writer as creator (and “expert”), the mode of production and distribution (publishers and editors), and the unidirectional flow of information that this implies. Benjamin envisioned an emancipatory and political potential emanating from the breaking down of barriers between artist/author and the process of production and distribution, and that such a transformation of “apparatuses of production” was a necessary shift that could enable social change. This gives us insight into imagining the producer (researcher) as designer.

How might *researchers* as authors/artists/content creators take up some of these challenges in transforming academic publishing to expand access and increase research impact? This is where design thinking comes to the fore as a strategy-based approach to problem solving that involves stakeholder engagement, analytical thinking, creativity, and problem solving. At its best, design thinking offers researchers the opportunity to reach across disciplines to consider new approaches to research production and impact.

But what do we mean when we speak of design thinking? While it has most certainly become popular in a broad range of fields over the past ten years, it is in many ways an elusive concept, and one not easily articulated (Kimball, 2011). And as Anna Rylander (2009) points out, it is hard enough understanding design and thinking, let alone *design thinking*.

Perhaps the most obvious attribute of design is that it makes ideas tangible, it takes abstract thoughts and inspirations and makes something concrete. In fact, it’s often said that designers don’t just think and then translate those thoughts into tangible form, they actually think through making things. (Matt Hunter, as quoted in Norman, 2013, n.p.)

Design thinking offers the researcher a new way of thinking about integrating collaborative processes of knowledge and content development with a more assertive involvement in different aspects of publishing (and modes of publication), including graphic design, marketing, communications, and dissemination, with the ultimate goal

of increasing access to and the impact of research. As taken up by many social scientists, it is a situated practice whereby researchers create networks and collaborate with the potential users of research to determine priorities, shape content, and mobilize research. Such an approach is not unusual in graphic design, but is hardly a standard practice in academia and in particular, the social sciences. Here we draw on the notion of social marketing, a well-established practice in health promotion (Andreasen, 1995; Kotler, Roberta, & Lee, 2002), which is defined as “the use of marketing to design and implement programs to promote socially beneficial behavior change” (Grier & Bryant, 2005, p. 319) to benefit the public.

Adoption of design thinking in research does not suggest “everyone is a designer” (because if everyone is, no one is) or that researchers must become masters of every aspect of research production. It needs to be acknowledged, for instance, that graphic designers have specialized training, experience, and expertise that may not be part of the skill set of the average researcher (Norman, 2013). Rather, design thinking necessarily posits a collective and collaborative approach to knowledge production, one that draws on varied knowledge bases and specialized skill sets.

There is, then, a way of imagining design thinking in relation to knowledge mobilization. Rather than conceptualizing and operationalizing the process of research generation (conceiving, conducting, analyzing, writing) as being separate and distinct from the publication and distribution process, it means seeing these different aspects of research production as integrated and continuous. To achieve this also means a different, and more productive, kind of engagement between researchers and potential users of research. In the context of the crisis in academic publishing, design thinking augmented by technological innovation may allow social scientists to actively and creatively mobilize research, engage broader audiences, and affect change.

### **The Homeless Hub and a design approach to Knowledge Mobilization**

The work of the Canadian Homelessness Research Network (CHRN) offers some insights into how design thinking can be incorporated into Knowledge Mobilization (KMb) practice. Established in 2007, the CHRN’s mission is to mobilize research so that it has a bigger impact on solutions to homelessness. This happened in a context where homelessness research was not a particularly well-defined or robust subject area (there were no journals of homelessness research, nor any scholarly societies), nor was it having much influence on policy and practice. A central activity of the CHRN has been to create and support opportunities for engagement and collaboration between researchers, service providers, and policy makers at the local, regional, national, and international levels. Building relationships has been essential to creating a context where research is seen to be of greater use by government and the community, and a lot of progress has been made in a few short years.

A key project of the CHRN is the Homeless Hub, a web-based homelessness research library and information centre (arguably the largest in the world), which, through the use of technology, enables knowledge dissemination and supports networking. The Hub has been developed with an understanding that different users (in government, academia, and the social services sector) are likely to think about and utilize research in different ways.

More than merely an archive and a tool for disseminating existing research, the CHRN produces and distributes original research through the Hub, which is specifically intended to contribute to public dialogue and to help influence the development of policy and practice. The integrated model of KMB embraced by the CHRN incorporates design thinking into all aspects of production, from content creation to dissemination.

The relational dimension of the work of the CHRN is evident both through a team approach to knowledge production involving people with divergent skill sets (research, graphic design, technology, social media), and through the active networking and partnership practices with different communities and stakeholders. An evolving understanding of how people engage media and use technology to access information has led to a reconsideration of how academic work is published. It has changed the way the CHRN thinks about content development, the use of graphics, web design, and the flow of information, and how all aspects of production need to be integrated. In fact, this shift has altered the processes of research and writing, so that these different elements are considered as part of the research design right from the beginning. Below is a consideration of key features of the CHRN's approach to knowledge mobilization, as informed by design thinking.

### **Content creation**

The research knowledge generated by the CHRN through the Homeless Hub is designed to broaden the audience for homelessness research, and ultimately to create impact. While a range of research outputs are produced, some short (topic summaries, plain language summaries, curriculum materials, blogs) and some longer (books), perhaps the most significant content is the research paper/report series, which features original or summative research that is specifically designed to address research and policy questions or interests.

A lack of meaningful interaction and engagement between users and producers of research is oft cited as a primary reason for the underutilization of research (Armstrong & Alsop, 2010; Caplan, 1979; Davies & Powell, 2010; Nutley et al., 2007). As such, careful consideration is given to nurturing what Jack Spaapen and Leonie Van Drooge (2011) describe as productive interactions between researchers, decision makers (including policy makers), and practitioners in the creation of content. Some examples include

- *Canadian Definition of Homelessness*. The development of a definition (Canadian Homelessness Network, 2012) was seen as important for creating a common language, and supports work on enumerating homelessness and measuring progress. Key to creating the definition was broad stakeholder involvement – including academic researchers, service providers, government officials, and people with lived experience – because it was felt that a definition would have to be useable and make sense to those in the world of policy and practice.
- *Live, Learn, Grow: Supporting Transitions to Adulthood for Homeless Youth*. One of the challenges within the homelessness sector is to develop and implement effective models of accommodation and supports. This report (Gaetz & Scott,

2012a) presented a framework for the Foyer, a successful transitional housing model for youth widely used in the UK and Australia, but not in Canada. The report was both conceptual in that it proposed a shift in how responses to youth homelessness should be considered, and also instrumental through the development of an evidence-based framework for implementation. An accompanying toolkit (Gaetz & Scott, 2012b) was also produced. The report was conceived of and designed in consultation with policy makers and youth homelessness service providers in several provinces.

- *The State of Homelessness in Canada, 2013*. Developed in partnership with the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, this was the first national “report card” on homelessness (Gaetz, Donaldson, Richter, & Gulliver, 2013), and pulled together existing research on risk factors for homelessness, point in time counts, the definition cited above, etc. The report included the newest and most reliable estimates of the number of people who are homeless in Canada on a given day, and in a given year.

In each of these examples, the researchers were thinking about content from a design perspective. All the reports released by the Homeless Hub are built upon rigorous research and, without necessarily veering into advocacy documents, they include a point of view, and many include carefully crafted and targeted recommendations. The content was produced in an iterative way, involving researchers and end users, and was written in plain language so that academic jargon does not become a barrier. Finally, rather than presenting results in a way that reflects more traditional approaches to research writing – thesis, methodology, results, discussion – an attempt was made to construct a more engaging narrative.

### **Publication process**

Though every effort is made to disseminate research to as wide an audience as possible, much of the Homeless Hub’s library content is inaccessible because of preexisting copyrights. In contrast, the original research content that is produced by the CHRN is guided by an “open access” policy. This not only includes research summaries and full reports, but also three edited books (Hulchanski, Campsie, Chau, Hwang, & Paradis, 2009; Gaetz, O’Grady, Buccieri, Karabanow, & Marsolais, 2013; Gaetz, Scott, & Gulliver, 2013), which are free to download as a PDF or e-book (printed versions are available on a cost-recovery basis). Modern technology means that formatting reports and full books is possible through desktop publishing, and printed books can also easily be produced at a relatively low cost, even with small print runs. Because peer review matters both as a means of ensuring scholarly rigour and also because of expectations of academic researchers and institutions, a meticulous blind peer review process has been instituted for books and the research report series. The point of all this is that the CHRN is able to produce and publish high-quality research that is peer reviewed and open access. There is an alternative to commercial publishing.

### **Publication outputs**

A key element of the CHRN’s research design is the recognition of the need to produce research in multiple modalities. A seventy-page report cannot stand alone as a research output if the goal is to have a broad and varied audience embrace the research. Through community engagement strategies, the CHRN has learned that diverse audiences have



different capacities to consume research. Service providers, for instance, do not have the time to pour through long reports, regardless of how interesting the topic.

As such, when designing research it has now become standard practice to consider a variety of outputs in different modalities (written, graphic, video) for a given project, including the main book or report and also a separate executive summary, a two-page plain language summary, blog posts, a short promotional video(s), and infographics. Getting more granular, a number of outputs for social media (tweets, Facebook posts) are generated in advance that link back to the main report. The degree to which this range of outputs and elements are now typically considered early on in the development of research content is a clear expression of design thinking.

The trick is to find ways to speak through *treatment*, via a whole range of rhetorical devices – from the written to the visual to the operational – in order to make those proclamations as poignant as possible, and to consistently revisit, reexamine and re-express central themes. In this way we build a body of work, and from that body of work emerges a singular message. (Rock, 2011. p.15)

The design principle that underlies our approach is the notion of “layering,” with easily consumable and shareable content that does not require a high level of attention or commitment on the part of the consumer at the top, tweets, for example. Beneath that are shorter pieces of content that highlight key messages from the report: blogs, infographics, video. For those who want to go deeper, there are more substantial resources that go into more detail – executive summary, or in the case of the Foyer, a practical “toolkit” (Gaetz & Scott, 2012b) for implementation – and then finally, for those who have the interest and capacity to delve deeper, there is the full book or report. The layering idea is that people consuming the research can go as deep or shallow as they like, but the key messages from the work are very clear and cut across all design elements. Underpinning everything is a solid foundation of research.

Of course, it is understood that simply presenting research in different formats does not necessarily influence uptake (Walter et al., 2003). The CHRN relies on well-respected and well-established researchers to create content, people who are practiced at engaging end users, and the publication outputs are designed to appeal to a range of audiences with unique learning styles and consumption practices. Finally, through extensive support for networking and community engagement, the CHRN has established a solid reputation amongst service providers and policy makers.

### **Graphic design**

Effective and inspiring graphic design is integral to CHRN efforts to mobilize research. While it is true that all published research has elements of graphic design – whether it is a published book, a journal article, or merely a word document – it is probably safe to say that in the world of academic research, good graphic design is most often a secondary consideration, because of lack of capacity (skills and resources), but also because there is no tradition of wedding the two worlds.

When done well, graphic design helps to organize how and what a reader looks at, and is undertaken in order to communicate an idea or message(s) to a specific audience.

Rather than simply trying to make the research “look good,” the graphic design of all of our research outputs is carefully considered as a means of engaging audiences in order to draw attention to and highlight the work, and to emphasize key research results and messages. For a specific project such as the Live, Learn, Grow: Supporting Transitions to Adulthood for Homeless Youth report (Gaetz & Scott, 2012a), we ensure that there is a cohesive design identity or “look” across all outputs. In this case, including each section of the associated toolkit (Gaetz & Scott, 2012b).

When designing, the range of potential media through which content will be consumed is considered, whether this means printed versions or electronic media (computers, handhelds, tablets). Outputs are designed so that they are social media friendly, and can be posted on Facebook, for instance. Finally, using infographics within reports and as elements that can be mobilized through different social media has become a more significant way to convey key messages from the research. With the State of Homelessness in Canada 2013 (Gaetz et al., 2013), for instance, infographics became a highly effective way of disseminating content.

### **Marketing, communications, and dissemination**

Both the Homeless Hub as a whole and also specific research projects draw on principles of social marketing. A weekly newsletter highlighting the latest in homelessness research is a central vehicle for dissemination, and it is accompanied by an ongoing and active social media campaign that uses Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr, etc.

When launching a project, the CHRN plans and implements a strategy that brings together all the design elements and coordinates the release of materials to reach intended audiences and have maximum impact. Depending on the situation, the release strategy may include engaging conventional media alongside mobilizing social media. Sometimes the two work together in unanticipated ways. When the Canadian Definition of Homelessness was released in 2012, an aggressive conventional media strategy was avoided because it was felt the content was too esoteric – of interest only to policy wonks – so a social media strategy was opted for instead. However, reporters working for conventional media also troll social media for stories, and mainstream news outlets quickly picked up the story. It received more mainstream press coverage than anything the CHRN had done to date. This learning experience illustrated how an effective communications strategy can incorporate both conventional and new media.

The release of the State of Homelessness report (Gaetz et al., 2013) involved the most comprehensive media strategy the CHRN had ever engaged in, as the intended audience was very broad. In getting the message out, the CHRN benefited from its partnership with the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness and their extensive media and advocacy experience. The launch was also promoted and supported by a broad range of individuals and institutions the CHRN is actively engaged with.

Changes in the way people use technology have led to a rethinking of whether resources created by the CHRN should only be available on the Homeless Hub. A Creative Commons (Creative Commons, 2001) perspective has now been embraced, and people are free to take Homeless Hub reports or content and post them on their own websites. While this makes evaluation more challenging, as one does not always

know where content goes and how it is accessed, it does offer the benefit of creating a wider readership for the work.

## **Evaluation**

Research on knowledge mobilization reveals that the impact of social science research is hard to predict, difficult to guide, and challenging to measure and assess for a number of reasons, including the nonlinear way that information circulates; the fact that research is, at best, but one factor that influences policy and practice; and because there are both conceptual and methodological issues that limit our understanding (Boaz, Fitzpatrick, & Shaw, 2009; Nutley, et al, 2007). Making any claim for the impact of the work of the CHRN is thus a challenge.

The CHRN engages in both quantitative and qualitative research and evaluation in order to assess effectiveness and to improve practices. Web-based analytics and bibliometrics are used to assess the Homeless Hub audience and reach, as well as the outcome of strategies associated with a specific project or a new approach. Knowledge gained gets fed back into the design thinking of the CHRN. This is done while acknowledging the limitations to quantitative or bibliometric evaluation strategies, for as John Brewer (2011) cautions: “counting the countable because the countable can be easily counted renders impact illegitimate” (p. 256). Such metrics can tell you how many people “looked” at your site or your research outputs, but they do not help to determine how people understand the research, if it creates a shift in their thinking, or if they act on it.

As such any understanding of research impact emanating from the work of the CHRN is best understood through qualitative methods and case studies. Members of the CHRN National Advisory Body annually provide feedback on CHRN efforts as part of our strategy of continuous improvement, and we regularly seek feedback from project partners on our strategies and activities. The CHRN is also currently conducting qualitative studies on the impact of specific projects and activities to determine how policy makers and practitioners engaged with the research (see Nichols & Gaetz, 2014).

## **Conclusion**

Design thinking, when applied to knowledge mobilization, offers researchers new ways to imagine the production and consumption of research as a strategy for engaging the worlds of policy and practice. This is not to say there are not already strong elements of design that go into conducting research and preparing work for publication. After all, as researchers we develop expertise in methodology and analysis, a design practice in itself.

Design thinking means a different approach to the scholarship of engagement and to research dissemination strategies. Rather than positioning the researcher(s) as separate, disengaged from audiences outside of academia, design thinking means collaborating with potential users of the research at different stages in the process. What is clear from the experience of the CHRN is that research impact encompasses both the *process* and the *outcome* of relationship building, collaboration, and meaningful partnership.

For the researcher, design thinking means rethinking academic publishing as a process, as well as exploring new ways to incorporate aspects of design into every stage and

element of that process. This transforms the content creation process, for when the researcher is engaged in writing up results, attention has to be given to how the content will be shaped for different audiences; what the final outputs and modalities of the research will be; the “look” and graphic design of these outputs; and the marketing and communication plans that will be necessary to create the connection between the research and policy, practice, and ultimately social change. Design thinking can allow us to completely reimagine the process of knowledge creation, dissemination, and impact.

### Notes

1. See the appendix for a research snapshot of this project.
2. In 2014, the Canadian Homelessness Research Network was renamed the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness: <http://www.homelesshub.ca/CanadianObservatoryOnHomelessness>
3. In writing this article I would like to acknowledge the contribution of Evan Winland-Gaetz who, through conversations about design theory, inspired this consideration of how design thinking and graphic design can be brought to bear on knowledge mobilization in the social sciences.

### References

- Amara, N., Ouimet, M., & Landry, R. (2004). New evidence on instrumental, conceptual and symbolic utilization of university research in government agencies. *Science Communication*, 26(1), 75-106.
- Andreasen, A.R. (1995). *Marketing social change: Changing behavior to promote health, social development and the environment*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Armstrong, F., & Alsop, A. (2010, July). Debate: co-production can contribute to research impact in the social sciences. *Public Money and Management*, 208-210.
- Benjamin, W. (1970, July/August). The author as producer. *New Left Review*, 1/62, 1-9.
- Blauvelt, A., & Lupton, E. (2009). Introduction. In A. Blauvelt & E. Lupton (Eds), *Graphic design: Now in production*, (pp. 8-11). Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center.
- Boaz, A., Fitzpatrick, S., & Shaw, B. (2009). Assessing the impact of research on policy: A literature review. *Science and Public Policy*, 36(4), 255-270.
- Brewer, J.D. (2011). The impact of impact. *Research Evaluation*, 20(3), 255-256.
- Canadian Homelessness Research Network. (2012). *Canadian definition of homelessness*. The Homeless Hub. URL: <http://www.homelesshub.ca/CHRNhomelessdefinition> [September 25, 2014].
- Caplan, N. (1979). The two-communities theory and knowledge utilization. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 22(3), 459-470.
- Chressanthis, G.A., & Chressanthis, J.D. (1993). Publisher monopoly power and third-degree price discrimination of scholarly journals. *Technical Services Quarterly*, 11(2), 13-36.
- Creative Commons. (2001). URL: <http://creativecommons.org/> [September 25, 2014].
- Davies, H., Nutley, S., & Walter, I. (2005). Assessing the impact of social science research: Conceptual, methodological and practical issues. A background discussion paper for the *ESRC Symposium on Assessing Non-Academic Impact of Research*. Scotland, UK: Research Unit for Research Utilisation, School of Management, University of St Andrews. URL: [www.st-and.ac.uk/~ruru](http://www.st-and.ac.uk/~ruru) [September 25, 2014].
- Davies, H., & Powell, A. (2010). Helping social research make a difference. Exploration of a wider repertoire of approaches to communicating and influencing through research. A discussion paper for the Health Foundation seminar. Scotland, UK: St Andrews University.

- Edwards, R. & Shulenburger, D. (2003). The high cost of scholarly journals (and what to do about it). *Change*, 35(6), 10-19.
- Estabrooks, C.A., Floyd, J.A., Scott-Findlay, S., O'Leary, K.A., & Gushta, M. (2003). Individual determinants of research utilization: A systematic review. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 43(5), 506-520.
- Gaetz, S. (2010). The struggle to end homelessness in Canada: How we created the crisis, and how we can end it. *The Open Health Services and Policy Journal*, 3(21), 21-26.
- Gaetz, S., Donaldson, J., Richter, T., & Gulliver, T. (2013). *The state of homelessness in Canada 2013*. The Homeless Hub. URL: <http://www.homelesshub.ca/SOHC2013>
- Gaetz, S., O'Grady, B., Buccieri, K., Karabanow, J., & Marsolais, A. (Eds.). (2013). *Youth homelessness in Canada: Implications for policy and practice*. Toronto, ON: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press. URL: <http://www.homelesshub.ca/youthhomelessness> [September 25, 2014].
- Gaetz, S., & Scott, F. (2012a). *Live, learn, grow: Supporting transitions to adulthood for homeless youth – a framework for the foyer in Canada*. The Homeless Hub. URL: <http://www.homelesshub.ca/foyer> [September 25, 2014].
- Gaetz, S., & Scott, F. (2012b). *The foyer toolkit*. The Homeless Hub. URL: <http://www.homelesshub.ca/resource/foyer-toolkit> [September 25, 2014].
- Gaetz, S., Scott, F., & Gulliver, T. (Eds.). (2013). *Housing first in Canada – Supporting communities to end homelessness*. Toronto, ON: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press. URL: <http://www.homelesshub.ca/Library/View.aspx?id=56275> [September 25, 2014].
- Grier, S., & Bryant, C. (2005). Social marketing in public health. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 26, 319-339.
- Heller, S. (2011) Design Entrepreneur 3.0. In Andrew Blauvelt & Ellen Lupton (Eds), *Graphic design: Now in production*, (pp. 32-53). Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center.
- Homeless Hub. (2007). URL: <http://www.homelesshub.com/> [September 25, 2014].
- Hulchanski, J.D., Campsie, P., Chau, S., Hwang, S., & Paradis, E. (Eds.). (2009). *Finding home: Policy options for addressing homelessness in Canada*. Toronto, ON: Cities Centre Press, University of Toronto.
- Kotler P., Roberto N., & Lee, N. (2002). *Social marketing: Improving the quality of life*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lupton, E. (1998). The designer as producer. In Heller, S. (Ed.), *The Education of a graphic designer* (pp.159-162). New York, NY: Allworth Press.
- McGuigan, G.S., & Russell, R.D. (2008). The business of academic publishing: A strategic analysis of the academic journal publishing industry and its impact on the future of scholarly publishing. *Electronic Journal of Academic and Special Librarianship*, 9(3). URL: [http://southernlibrarianship.icaap.org/content/v09n03/mcguigan\\_go1.html](http://southernlibrarianship.icaap.org/content/v09n03/mcguigan_go1.html) [September 25, 2014].
- Monbiot, G. (2011, August 29). Academic publishers make Murdoch look like a socialist. *The Guardian*. URL: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/aug/29/academic-publishers-murdoch-socialist> [September 25, 2014].
- Morgan Stanley Research (2002). Media industry overview: Scientific publishing: Knowledge is power. *Media - Equity Research Report Europe*. URL: <http://www.econ.ucsb.edu/~tedb/Journals/morganstanley.pdf> [September 25, 2014].
- Nichols, N., & Gaetz, S. (2014). Strategies for Sustaining Complex Partnerships. *Scholarly and Research Communications*, 5(3), 16 pp.
- Norman, C. (2013, August 9). Defining the new designer. *Design Thinking Foundations*. URL: <http://www.designfoundations.ca/education/defining-the-new-designer/> [September 25, 2014].
- Nutley, S., Walter, L., & Davies, H.T.O. (2007). *Using evidence: How research can inform public services*. London, UK: Policy Press.

**Scholarly and Research  
Communication**

VOLUME 5 / ISSUE 3 / 2014

- Rock, M. (2011). *Fuck content*. In A. Blauvelt & E. Lupton (Eds.), *Graphic design: Now in production*. Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 14-15.
- Rylander, A. (2009). Design thinking as knowledge work: Epistemological foundations and practical implications. *Design Management Journal*, 4(1), 7-19.
- Spaapen, J., & van Drooge, L. (2011). Introducing 'productive interactions' in social impact assessment. *Research Evaluation*, 20(3), 211-218.
- Walter, I., Nutley, S., & Davies, H. (2003). *Research impact: A cross sector review*. UK: Research Unit for Research Utilisation, Department of Management. Scotland, UK: University of St Andrews.

# research snapshot

summarize mobilize



## Knowledge Mobilization as Design: The Canadian Homelessness Research Network

### What is this research about?

A key challenge in developing solutions to homelessness is that research does not always have a big impact on policy and practice. Typical ways of publishing academic research make it difficult to understand. Research is often presented in ways that make it challenging for policy makers and practitioners to use.

Academic papers and reports are usually published by academic journals. The peer review process is meant to maintain a high intellectual standard. The way research is written and presented in scholarly journals is intended to appeal to academics. The fact that most academic presses are owned by large communications companies has resulted in rising costs for university subscribers. In addition, strict copyright laws make it hard for the average reader to get access to the articles.

The scholarly journal may not be the best way for researchers to get their research results to policy makers and community members. For those interested in creating an impact for their research, there is a need to rethink how research is written, presented and disseminated. Traditional approaches

### What you need to know:

Researchers do not have to rely on traditional approaches to academic publishing. With changing technologies knowledge mobilizers have an increasing variety of tools. Using 'design thinking' can lead to innovative approaches to publishing strategically designed to increase the reach of research.

are not getting the research to a broader audience.

The CHRN has been successful by both consulting and collaborating with key stakeholders. This practice changes the research, writing and publication processes. The CHRN uses an approach to publishing that removes the need to rely on corporate owned scholarly journals to get material out. This has meant linking researchers, graphic designers and technology experts to create new ways of presenting, publishing and marketing materials.

### What did the researcher do?

The researcher uses the concept of "design thinking" to suggest new possibilities for academic publishing. The CHRN is used as a case study to highlight how such a design

## research snapshot

summarize mobilize

approach has led to innovation in publishing and dissemination of homelessness research. The research focused on the experiences of creating and sharing recent large reports and e-books. The purpose of this case study is to look at the ways that design focus has informed all of the areas of research from planning to knowledge mobilization.

### What did the researcher find?

Research can have a greater impact when there is collaboration and partnership between researchers and the potential users of research. This means encouraging active collaboration between researchers, communities and different professions (such as graphic designers and information technology specialists). A design approach can help make research available to more audiences outside of academics. This is because different groups obtain and use information in different ways. The partnerships between researchers and community inform every step of the process. Formats of delivering information must be designed for the user.

CHRN has achieved this by using a range of formats. In addition to releasing a report CHRN may also release research summaries, blog posts, videos and infographics. The different formats allow for more audiences to access the information. CHRN has been successful at spreading this information through a well thought out communications and marketing strategy, and through the use of social media campaigns.

One challenge is to maintain the rigour of peer reviewed content seen in academic journals. The CHRN has overcome this barrier by using a peer review process for its reports and e-books. This has allowed the

CHRN to distribute powerful reports that are more cost effective and have a much broader reach than traditional publishing.

### How can you use this research?

A design approach works well for knowledge mobilization. Researchers should think of the needs of the audience they are trying to reach and include them in their planning processes. Schools and organizations should look to build capacity for small-scale publishing.

### About the Researcher

Dr. Stephen Gaetz is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education, and Director of the Canadian Homelessness Research Network and the Homeless Hub, York University.

[SGaetz@edu.yorku.ca](mailto:SGaetz@edu.yorku.ca)

### Citation

Gaetz, S. (2013). Knowledge mobilization as design: The case of the Canadian Homelessness Research Network.

### Keywords

*Knowledge mobilization, Design, Research planning, Research dissemination, Social media*

### Knowledge Mobilization at York

York's Knowledge Mobilization Unit provides services for faculty, graduate students, community and government seeking to maximize the impact of academic research and expertise on public policy, social programming, and professional practice. This summary has been supported by the Office of the Vice-President Research and Innovation at York and project funding from SSHRC.

[kmbunit@yorku.ca](mailto:kmbunit@yorku.ca)  
[www.researchimpact.ca](http://www.researchimpact.ca)

