Bretton Woods Project Audience Survey 2012: Key messages

Overview

The Bretton Woods Project has committed to conduct a review of the efficacy and impact of its communication, in all forms. This includes assessing how well our communication outputs are received, how they are utilised and the extent to which they impact upon the Project’s audiences and constituencies. The Project prioritises engagement with civil society and NGOs globally, in particular in the South, and officials from governments and in the IFIs. It also seeks to engage with academic experts and the media in order to realise its mission.

As part of this review, in May 2012 the Bretton Woods Project conducted an online survey of its readership. A total of 486 people responded (459 completed the English version and 27 completed the Spanish version), an increase of almost 40% on our previous survey response. This paper summarises the key messages from the feedback and sets them against the context of other NGOs and commentators in the field, as well as a 2010 Bretton Woods Project survey.

Headline points

- **Popularity of publications**: 74% of respondents rated Bretton Woods Project publications ‘good’ or ‘very good’: almost 80% felt the level of our content is “about right”.
- **High engagement with Bretton Woods Project publications** in terms of readership/click through/forwarding of publications/email newsletters: 67% explore the links in e-newsletters; 40% actively use our information, and almost 30% have some contact with Bretton Woods Project staff.
- **Southern audiences**: there is little difference in the views expressed by Northern and Southern respondents; Southern readers are proportionally heavier users of email newsletters, and marginally less positive about publications’ quality and tone. Southern government officials tend to be more positive than their Northern counterparts.
- **Qualitative feedback** (comment section) underlines the unique role and value of Bretton Woods Project publications but also allows free comment, some of which highlights issues with accessibility and style, requiring further exploration as the Project evaluates its communications.

Audience

**Comparison with other global development/finance websites**

We have compared our readership statistics with two popular websites/communications portals: Duncan Green’s From Poverty to Power blog for Oxfam (www.oxfamblogs.org) and the Smart Aid/ Dave Algosos’s blog survey (http://www.poverty-action.org/) although noting that they are blogs, which Bretton Woods Project does not use routinely. In addition, comparisons are made with an earlier 2010 Project survey where possible; though the focus of the earlier survey questions was slightly different.
Demographics

- For almost 44% of respondents English is not their first language;
- The North-South share is 71:29 (similar to the 2010 Project survey ratio 73:26);
- Over 62% of respondents are men, while nearly 37% are women;
- The largest group is aged 25–34 years;
- Respondents were mostly employed in NGOs, civil society or activist organisations (41%), and research or academia (21%). 11% were from an IFI, government, or another multilateral organisation, 7% were students and 7% were from the private sector. The previous Project survey revealed a similar segmentation although there has been a 10% increase in NGO representatives and corresponding decline in respondents from an academic and government background.

In terms of Southern audiences, Smart Aid receives approximately the same proportion of readers from the South (Duncan Green does not survey location). On professional roles, Duncan Green’s blog receives the largest readership from students (28%) compared to NGO workers (22%). However the majority of readers from the Smart Aid blog are from an NGO background (25%), similar to the Project. The age demographic of both blogs is similar to Bretton Woods Project ‘s, the largest group being 25-34 year olds (Duncan Green: 44%, Smart Aid: 33%) compared to 27% for Bretton Woods Project. On gender, Duncan Green and Smart Aid both obtain a better gender balance (54:46 and 51:47 male/female respectively) than Bretton Woods Project audiences.

Bretton Woods Project audience’ communications preferences

For Bretton Woods Project survey respondents the most important sources of information were academic articles and books (54%) online news media (47%) NGOs and civil society organisations (39%). Asked to name sources of news/information which they regularly consult, 18% cited the Economist, 16% the Financial Times and 10% the Guardian.

Although there is no direct comparison with other websites/blogs, Smart Aid survey respondents were asked more specifically about their priorities for blogs. For 88% respondents “reading analysis and opinion on aid/development” were important, whilst 74% highlighted “following trends in the sector” and “learning from others’ experience” as priorities.

Engagement with Bretton Woods Project

Communications received by respondents:

40% have read or used our content, and 23% only receive emails from Bretton Woods Project. 10% of survey respondents said that they didn’t know the Bretton Woods Project until completing the survey, half of whom are based in Southern countries. Positively, the proportion of respondents stating in the 2010 Project survey that they knew the project “only a little” was 33% suggesting an increase in brand recognition of over 20%.
Topics of interest

More than half of all respondents expressed an interest in aid/debt and also international financial architecture (55%), and only slightly less highlighted good governance (53%) and social issues (51%). Environment, human rights and macroeconomic policy are also popular topics, all selected by 45% of respondents, while infrastructure was selected by nearly 32% of respondents. The breakdown is broadly consistent with the 2010 Project survey results. The major difference has been a closing of the gap between the five most popular topics and an increase in people specifying specialist topics. In 2010, no topic received endorsement by over 50% of respondents.

These results are reflected in our comparator sites. The Smart Aid survey recorded that the most popular choices were “economic development” (57%) and “governance & institutional development” (44%). Social development was rated fourth (38%) and environmental issues were prioritised by a far lower proportion (22%).

Bretton Woods publications

Feedback on publications

Almost 75% of respondents rated Bretton Woods Project publications ‘good’ or ‘very good’ – similar proportions felt that they were ‘about right’ on detail (75%) and tone (71%). There was a marginally higher ‘poor’ rating amongst government and Bank/IMF officials (14% and 20% respectively) but this is skewed by a low response rate. This is also an improvement on the 2010 Project survey, in which 71% described the Bretton Woods Project as “an effective communicator”. These figures are slightly lower than Duncan Green’s blog - 81% of readers rate his blog ‘about right’ and 78% describe his blog as ‘very useful’ or ‘slightly useful’.

Tone of publications
As the graph on page 3 indicates, 70% of respondents were in approval of the content of the Project’s publications. In terms of negative feedback, 10% of respondents described Bretton Woods Project’s publications as bland/too bland. Almost 19% of respondents said that our publications are too opinionated.

Content of publications

The message that almost 80% of respondents rate our publications’ content as ‘about right’ is extremely positive. 11% of the respondents who rated Bretton Woods Project publications ‘simple’ were researchers, and 33% were IFI/bank officials. The highest response of ‘complex’ in relation to the publications was by NGO audiences (12%). A similar proportion of Southern respondents rated Bretton Woods Project publications as ‘complex’.

There is a high level of active engagement with Bretton Woods Project publications. 67% of respondents explore the links in email newsletters. 61% were motivated to search the internet for more information, whilst 40% circulated the emails to colleagues. Specific comments included:

- “Very informative and balanced”
- “These publications are very useful for professionals. However, since they deal with development work there could be some publication which could be used by general public.”
- “It would be better for the articles to be less complex and shorter.
- “Less text in the printed Update version, more newspaper style layout; it is a bit heavy to read... new layout for the electronic version, for example like IPPR newsletter.”

Changes to Bretton Woods Project publications

Respondents recommended the following areas for change:

These suggestions will be investigated in more depth during stakeholder interviews.
Website

Usage
Respondents commonly consult our website one to three times a month (25%). 24% visit the site once every one to two months. NGO workers and activists are more likely to use the website on a frequent basis than IMF/World Bank/ government officials. Significantly, Duncan Green’s blog receives a far more regular readership. His audience most commonly visit his blog three times a week (52%) or more than four times a week (34%), however a daily email is sent to subscribers promoting the blog, which also focuses on more general development issues, in contrast to the Project’s specialist focus on the World Bank and IMF. An overwhelming (71%) of people visited the website to read critical analysis and opinion on the World Bank and IMF. Other significant reasons were professional interest (68%) and to get news on the Bank/IMF (49%).

The top three outputs respondents were looking for from our website were:
- Articles and analysis (81%)
- Research papers, briefings or reports (73%)
- Links to critical news from other sources about the World Bank and the IMF (43%)

A large number of respondents (30%) also valued articles from Southern NGOs.

This view of Bretton Woods Project communications as a portal for other information and research is also common to the blogs. In terms of topics blogged, Duncan Green’s readers value most highly ‘original articles’ followed by ‘summaries of other research’ and lastly ‘summaries of Oxfam research’.

Access/format
61% of respondents found the website easy to access. A similarly high proportion (67%) said it looked ok/great and easy to read. Specific comments included:
- “Better explanations, more attractive layouts, I use mainly the website and your e-newsletter.”
- “Very straightforward nuggets of info that I could share. Or brief paragraphs that would give me more insights (but alas, normally one has to do more work than that for real understanding...)”
- “Useful to be sent information to my email address that is relevant to my interest...links to reports, news, publications, etc.”
- “I use the Bretton Woods Project to monitor other views, but believe that the world is more complicated than the tone of advocacy in the Bretton Woods Project.”

Bretton Woods Update

The most common level of readership of the Update is one to two articles (34%). 24% read three to five articles, however 25% do not know what the Bretton Woods Update is. This should be qualified by the fact that details of the survey were circulated to non-Update subscribers. Feedback on the style and format of the Update is largely positive - 72% people think it looks good/very good. In the 2010 Project survey 84% of respondents agreed that the Update is “a useful resource “. This difference may be explained by the increasing engagement with the Update as an electronic resource. The Update features that are rated most useful are:
- At Issue (64.2%)
- Articles by the Bretton Woods Project (63%)
- Comment piece (48.2%)

No feature was labelled ‘not very useful for more than 9% of respondents, giving a positive mandate for the Update’s work.
Conclusions

The high level of responses to the survey is positive, and allows for a degree of confidence in interpreting the findings. Broadly the survey reflected considerable support, echoed in the generally positive responses to our communications, and the *Update* and website as tools.

However, the ‘comments’ sections of the survey reveal constructive criticism of the publications with comments highlighting problems with accessibility and readability. This is of particular note given the high response from a non-English speaking audience segment and our objectives of including Southern organisations. The lower participation of women in the survey is also an issue which requires further investigation, especially as the Project has a gender remit. Comments on the length/complexity of the articles and newsletters are helpful in assessing the value of our communications. The varying and even conflicted feedback concerning publications being “simplistic/complex” and “bland/opinionated” with the segments of respondents gives us valuable insight into the challenge of how we can best meet the needs of our heterogeneous target audiences, principally NGO and civil society representatives and officials, in addition to academic experts and media professionals.

The depth of engagement with the Bretton Woods Project website and *Update* articles is challenging and this will be a priority for the communications review to tackle. Also the confusion over the Bretton Woods Project brand, differentiation of and low value ascribed to some communications outputs will need more attention. These points will be pursued in the next phase of our communications review, through in-depth interviews with key stakeholders.