

HOW WE...

UPHOLD EDITORIAL QUALITY



Edited by the IDS
Knowledge Services
www.ids.ac.uk/info

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For all knowledge and information intermediaries, the quality of the information they deal with is central to their work. At the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) over the last ten years, we have developed a range of Knowledge Services to encourage access to, and use of, development research and information.

But how do we decide what material to include in our services and what to exclude? What selection criteria do we use? How do we decide between one report and the next? Making these choices and upholding editorial quality is a daily challenge for people working with knowledge and information. Developing a reputation for quality is essential to build the trust and credibility with users and stakeholders that will enable a knowledge or information service to realise its objectives.

For knowledge and information intermediaries which, as the IDS Knowledge Services do, deal with information from multiple sources, editorial quality has two aspects:

- Firstly, the quality of the material we select for inclusion in our services.
- Secondly, the quality of the products we deliver or services we provide.

Editorial quality in this “how we” guide relates to the first of these two aspects, i.e. the selection of material. The guide does not look at quality in terms of production processes or outputs.

ABOUT THE “HOW WE” SERIES

This guide follows our first “how we” guide on producing email newsletters. They are called “how we” guides because they share our experience and learning and try to identify good practice. We do not claim there are right and wrong ways of doing these things; indeed all of our services have applied this good practice in different ways.

The content of the guides may be of interest to people in other information, communication and knowledge management roles, but the guides focus on the particular challenges and approaches for those playing an information broker, mediator or information intermediary role in development contexts.

WHO ARE “WE”?

The Institute of Development Studies (IDS) is a leading global organisation for research, teaching and communications on international development. IDS is home to seven Knowledge Services which communicate research information to help people understand and make sense of the complexities and realities of poverty and inequality. These services are:

- **BLDS** British Library for Development Studies
- **id21** Research findings for development policymakers and practitioners
- **BRIDGE** Supporting gender advocacy and mainstreaming efforts, provides gender portal *Siyanda*

- **Eldis** Gateway to online information on development, includes social networking site *Eldis Community*
- **GSDRC** Governance and Social Development Resource Centre
- **HDI** Health and Development Information
- **Livelihoods Connect** Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches

We have an extensive international reach with approximately 2.7 million website visits a year and a further 55,000 readers through our print and CD-ROM outputs.

Details of our products and services are at www.ids.ac.uk/info

CONTENTS

- 1 How do we understand editorial quality?
- 2 What are our editorial values?
- 3 How do we establish editorial scope?
- 4 How do we identify content?
- 5 How do we uphold quality on a day-to-day basis?
- 6 What staff and structures do we use?
- 7 How do we review our service quality?

KEY TIPS

- 1 Be clear about your purpose, target audience and niche when setting editorial standards.
- 2 Clarify your editorial values. These will guide the decisions and choices you make about the information you include.
- 3 Establish your editorial scope and boundaries, such as themes/topics to cover and the type and amount of material to be included.
- 4 Develop proactive approaches for finding content for your service, for example, participate in networks, attend events, and explore how new web tools can help.
- 5 Enlist support from subject specialists. This is crucial for sourcing the right information and upholding overall service quality.
- 6 Develop clear editorial policies and selection criteria to help ensure consistency in the quality of information you include in your service.
- 7 Invest in editorial staff. They are central to making the editorial process work. Make sure you enable autonomy at all levels to help flows in decision-making.
- 8 Revisit your editorial values regularly and reflect on how you are upholding these through regular monitoring and evaluation. Factor in time to regularly review your editorial policies and topic coverage.

1

HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND EDITORIAL QUALITY?



At IDS we see editorial quality as an expression of our editorial values (see Section 2) which in turn set the standards we aspire to. Our editorial values have been shaped by the demands of our intended audiences and our own worldview.

Quality control refers to the policies and processes we use to uphold these values within our work and the services we offer. We recognise that 'quality' is a subjective concept. What is 'high quality' to some people may not be so to others or to a lesser extent.

One way to interpret quality might be in terms of:

1) Quality of individual items

Is a particular item well researched? Is the methodology sound? Does it come from a trustworthy source? Does it say something new or challenge orthodoxies? Does it have strong policy links? Is it written in a clear style? (See Section 5 for more detail)

2) Quality of a collection of items

Do the individual items add up to a balanced collection? Is a particular perspective prioritised and if so, is this made explicit? Is the collection cohesive?

Context

Editorial quality can only be defined in relation to the purpose of your service. This will depend on what you are trying to do and for whom, the means by which you have chosen to do it, the resources you have available, and the values you bring to your work. This thinking may well have happened at the project design or proposal stage of your service. It is important to refer back to this thinking when setting editorial policies and processes.

In setting editorial standards you will need to ask:

- Why are you working in this area and what do you hope to achieve through your work?
- Who is your work for and how will it help your target audiences?
- How will you meet the needs of your stakeholders and target audiences, and what kinds of products and services will you offer?
- How will your service be different to other sources of information available to your target audiences?

EDITORIAL ETHICS

Identity, neutrality and independence emerged as important concerns at the 'Locating the Power of In-Between'¹ conference in Pretoria, July 2008. Participants noted that issues of trust, neutrality and bias are often debated in relation to print and broadcast media and even Wikipedia. But they are not always seen as a concern in designing portals and other information services in the development sector.

There is little written about editorial ethics in relation to online services. It would appear that providing greater access to information is generally seen as a 'good thing'. However, in reality it is not possible to cover everything within any given field, which means that editors have to prioritise, playing what has been called 'a gatekeeper role'.

We are often challenged to explain our decisions. How neutral or objective are these decisions? And by extension, how neutral or objective are our services? How we structure our services and select content is undoubtedly shaped by our location at IDS even though most of our services try hard not to privilege IDS material over material from other producers. The topics and material we choose are inevitably influenced by IDS' perspective, probably as much as the 'controversial'

Development Gateway² was alleged to reflect the World Bank's perspective.

At IDS, controversy and debate have arisen when:

- we have showcased perspectives that go against the majority view at IDS
- we have refused to privilege IDS research over material from other sources
- we have excluded material for political reasons – BRIDGE, for example, has an explicit commitment to gender equality and will not cover material contradicting this
- we have been seen to over-represent material from mainstream sources.

Whilst we try to retain editorial independence, we are increasingly aware that our work is inevitably shaped by donor priorities, institutional location and personal beliefs. This has prompted us to try to be more transparent about how we make decisions and to develop other forms of accountability to stakeholders. Given that the I-K-Mediary Network³ is made up of organisations with similar goals, we hope to discuss these issues and develop good practice in this area in the future.

HOW DO OTHER INFORMATION PROVIDERS SEE QUALITY?

Our work within the Knowledge Services at IDS draws on the experience of other information and knowledge actors. However, the ways in which we work and the challenges we face are slightly different. Hence we felt the need to create this guide for others who, like us, do not sit squarely within traditional information disciplines. Here we look briefly at how some of these actors deal with the challenge of upholding editorial quality.

MEDIA

Editorial quality within print and broadcast media is shaped by journalistic principles concerning, for example, fairness and balanced coverage. The British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) Editorial Guidelines outline the standards the BBC expects of all its content to help editors deal with difficult editorial decisions. Al Jazeera has a code of ethics covering journalistic values of honesty, courage, fairness, balance, independence, credibility and diversity.

LIBRARIES

For a library, editorial quality is expressed in their acquisitions policy and through the professional judgement of their librarians. Relevance and quality of resources are evaluated when selecting possible acquisitions from a wide range of sources, ensuring good value in allocating the acquisition budget to the various research and learning needs of the library's readers.

PUBLISHERS

Publishing bodies, whether commercial or academic, have expert editorial input and peer review mechanisms that determine quality. Academic publishers may specialise by theme, discipline or sector and will commission or accept submissions based on market research and audience demand, commercial viability, originality and academic distinction. They may also look for books that cover neglected issues and disadvantaged groups and voices.

WIKIPEDIA

Wikipedia is an online collaborative encyclopaedia based on user submissions of content. The founders of Wikipedia have long debated how to ensure the reliability of content on the site. They have developed an interesting policy of a 'neutral point of view' against which all Wikipedia readers and contributors can challenge the content included.

¹The Locating the Power of In-Between conference, organised by IDS and the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in July 2008, explored the role of intermediaries and research brokers in evidence based pro-poor policy and practice. See <http://powerofinbetween.wordpress.com/>

²See **Knowledge for development?** By Kenneth King, Simon A. McGrath pp 78-85. The debate on the Development Gateway is one of the few that explores issues about information, knowledge and development in relation to a web portal.

³The I-K-Mediary Network is an emerging global network of organisations that play a knowledge and information intermediary role in development. See www.ids.ac.uk/go/ikmediary-group

2 WHAT ARE OUR EDITORIAL VALUES?

The table below tries to capture the values that the IDS Knowledge Services aspire to when making the editorial decisions discussed in this guide.

Articulating a collective set of values across all the services was not easy, given that each service has a distinctive purpose and

role. Each service would probably prioritise the list below differently, and so we have not attempted to do this. We reflected on other values such as being *representative*, but concluded that the following six values are the most important for our services from an editorial perspective.

Our thinking on values and how we interpret them is undeniably subjective.

We encourage you to reflect on how important these values are to you, how you would interpret and implement them differently and what we have missed.

We suggest you brainstorm amongst your team and with your stakeholders what *your* values are, how you understand them and why they are important.

Our values	Why is this value important?	What do we mean by it?	How does this value relate to other values?
Diversity	Featuring material from a diverse range of sources is central to our role as intermediaries and differentiates us from any research institute's own communication team. We also take a more political approach to diversity requiring us to be conscious of power imbalances in development communication processes. Our understanding of <i>diversity</i> therefore includes a commitment to recognise and represent different perspectives on complex development problems, particularly from those struggling to realise their rights in the South.	We feature material from a wide range of sources and try to avoid, for example, taking too much material from high profile organisations, which already have effective communications strategies. Increasingly we are aiming to give priority to publishers, authors and organisations based in the South. We are also looking at ways of broadening our coverage to include non-academic material and material in languages other than English by working in partnership and experimenting with different communications approaches.	By definition, <i>diversity</i> could also mean having to feature information from mainstream organisations or authors, otherwise <i>diversity</i> is lost. Working towards greater <i>diversity</i> may mean compromising on <i>quality</i> .
Redressing imbalances	We seek to <i>redress imbalances</i> in global coverage by featuring under-reported research. This can help amplify unheard voices and place them alongside elite and dominant perspectives. It can also raise the profile of topics or regions that we don't often hear about or from.	'Under-reported' can refer to the organisation, author, country, region or topic. Information can also be poorly circulated or in a format that isn't easily accessible or doesn't have a high profile.	This value is closely related to <i>diversity</i> . <i>Redressing imbalances</i> could include covering new topics and perspectives. It may clash with <i>quality</i> and <i>relevance</i> . It may also be difficult to <i>redress imbalances</i> and remain <i>timely</i> .
Timeliness	We need to reflect current debates and respond to the demand for solutions as problems arise. Being <i>timely</i> can add value fast. For example, users and stakeholders often want access to the latest thinking on climate change or the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).	<i>Timely</i> topics are those that 'everyone' – for example, donors, the news, national governments, United Nations summits, major events and conferences – are discussing and addressing and need information about.	<i>Timely</i> information is likely to be useful and relevant. There is the risk, however, of being <i>timely</i> at the expense of <i>redressing imbalances</i> . And we don't want to conform to dominant ways of thinking or follow elite agendas. It is important, therefore, to retain a sense of balance.
Originality	Featuring new findings and ideas will: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • help achieve <i>diversity</i> • meet user demands • connect people with new issues and debates • highlight innovative approaches • keep our services up-to-date and cutting-edge • attract donors 	New ideas will help shed different light on difficult problems, offering a fresh angle or perspective. We want to feature innovative and emerging solutions, and new evidence to support policy change. It is also important to recognise that although not so new in one sector or region, ideas and solutions may well be new and useful in others.	It is also important to build up a body of evidence to support change. This is especially true of health research and information, given its scientific basis. <i>Originality</i> , therefore, does not always imply <i>quality</i> .
Relevance	Our services should feature information that is relevant to our target audiences and be responsive to their demands. Information should also be relevant to our objectives, to the topics we cover, to current debates and so on, otherwise users will go elsewhere.	We aim to provide useful, practical information that responds to users' needs: articles and summaries will provide tangible steps, policy lessons or recommendations. Information also needs to be relevant to current debates, our partners, and to our mission and values.	If the information we provide is useful and relevant then we are providing a <i>quality</i> service. <i>Relevance</i> is also closely linked to <i>timeliness</i> .
Quality	We aim to provide target users with 'good' <i>quality</i> resources and information, as they perceive it. This will also help us maintain the reputation of the IDS Knowledge Services and IDS as a whole.	As discussed in Section 1, <i>quality</i> of an individual piece of research is generally interpreted in relation to methodology, perceived trustworthiness and so on. Defining 'good' <i>quality</i> , however, is difficult as it means different things to different people.	Trying to ensure that documents meet this criterion may clash with our efforts to achieve <i>diversity</i> and to <i>redress imbalances</i> . Again a sense of balance is needed.

3

HOW DO WE ESTABLISH EDITORIAL SCOPE?



Important decisions need to be made about the scope of the material you will include in your service that will guide day-to-day editorial processes. Setting the scope will involve decisions about three interrelated areas:

- 1) Themes, topics and sectors
- 2) Types and sources of material
- 3) Volume of material

Establishing the boundaries of coverage is important for your target audiences who need to know what to expect from your service, and to give guidance to the sourcing and identification of content. Defining the boundaries isn't easy and it's worth exploring this with key stakeholders and deciding what you *wouldn't* include and why.

In the broadest sense, the IDS Knowledge Services focus on development research, which we interpret as social science research concerning the social, economic and political aspects of development in the South. Successful development, as articulated in the IDS mission statement, means: 'a world in which poverty does not exist, social justice prevails and the voices of all people are heard in national and international institutions'.

Themes topics and sectors

Within these parameters, some of our services cover a broad range of themes (for example, Eldis), whilst others have a narrower focus: BRIDGE, for example, focuses solely on gender equity.

Each service separates content into broad thematic areas (such as governance, gender, poverty) and/or sectors (such as

health, agriculture, trade, education) and further subdivides these into sub-topics. Getting consensus on which themes/topics to focus on, or which words and terminology to use is not easy. It is worth looking at what other organisations have done, especially those similar to yours. Top level categorisation on your website helps users decide whether your coverage meets their needs.

Themes and topics in development are constantly evolving which means we have to remain flexible and respond accordingly. For example, we now report on climate change within almost every development sector which wasn't the case a few years ago.

Coverage can be determined by attempting to categorise material as it emerges or by deciding on a set of themes to focus on. Some of our services provide ongoing coverage across a range of themes whilst others provide one-off coverage of a particular issue. Approaches include:

- BRIDGE selects priority themes in collaboration with their International Advisory Committee and then provides a *Cutting Edge Pack* on that theme.
- Eldis chooses sub-topics within its thematic areas and provides 'Key Issue' pages as an introduction to new emerging topics.
- The GSDRC Steering Committee periodically reviews the resource centre's thematic coverage in line with evolving Department for International Development (DFID) priorities.

Sources and types of material

The IDS Knowledge Services source from any organisation that produces research including international development agencies, universities, smaller or less well known research organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

We cover a range of primarily text-based material, produced through analytical or research processes.

We exclude material that is too theoretical, abstract, technical or scientific. id21 places the greatest emphasis on peer reviewed material, in particular with regard to health. Our other services also include grey literature such as PhDs and conference papers, and practical guidance such as toolkits, training materials and evaluation reports.

Generally speaking, our services will not include data-sets, mission statements, ephemeral items such as news stories and press releases, or documents of purely local interest – with the exception of our work on the Eldis Community social networking site.

Volume of material

For web products, content will be added very frequently. Services have weekly or monthly targets but content is added almost daily. The volume of content we feature depends on:

- the amount of new material being produced on that subject or by our supplying organisations
- the purpose of the service – is it a selection of the best or aiming to be representative of the whole?
- operational and resource issues including type and cost of product (for example, print or online), and number of staff dedicated to the service

The number of new documents added to our websites varies every month depending on what is topical and how busy the team is. Our more specialised services aim for approximately 30 new documents per month. Eldis in contrast has a much higher throughput and aims for five new documents per topic, per week totalling approximately 400 per month.

GLOSSARY⁴

AGGREGATION Gathering information from multiple web sites, typically via RSS.

CONTENT We use this term both to describe the type of research material we feature, for example: documents, articles, readings and the summaries, abstracts, and so on we create from them.

EDITORIAL POLICY A document that outlines what material you will include in your information service and the principles and values that will guide these decisions.

PORTAL A web portal presents information from diverse sources in a unified way.

SELECTION CRITERIA A checklist of questions we use to establish the quality of a document.

SOURCING We use this term to describe the process of identifying and finding content.

WEB 2.0 The second generation of the World Wide Web, characterised by a move away from static web pages to dynamic and shareable content and social networking.

⁴ Some definitions were written by the editors of this guide and others were taken/adapted from the following websites and glossaries: <http://www.socialsignal.com/system/files/Social%20Signal%20-%20Web%20%20glossary.pdf>, <http://en.wiktionary.org> and <http://en.wikipedia.org/>

4 HOW DO WE IDENTIFY CONTENT?

Identifying and sourcing content is a constant challenge. A common assumption when setting up an information service is that content will come to you. But we have found it is best not to expect too much.

If you build a portal it is unlikely that people will willingly offer their content. Wikipedia is the exception: databases rarely fill themselves. Below are some approaches we have used to identify material.

Web searches

We monitor websites from development organisations and other relevant portals. If you have an organisation links section on your website this can be a good starting point. Likewise, compiling a directory of sources can provide a useful start for finding material.

Some of our services use a piece of software called WebSite Watcher www.aignes.com which monitors changes on selected web pages. It is relatively cheap and helps speed up the sourcing process. Open source and free alternatives include Page2RSS <http://page2rss.com> and Change Detection www.changedetection.com⁵

Subscriptions

Subscribing to relevant email newsletters, alerts, news feeds and journals within your field of interest helps you keep up-to-date with what is out there. Google Alerts enable you to create Google searches for your areas of interest. Searches are run regularly and an email alert of new online results is sent to you www.google.com/alerts

Recommendations and submissions

We encourage authors, publishers and experts to recommend or send in material via email or an online submission form. We don't receive a great deal in this way but it is a means of engaging with our users and tapping into current debates. Social bookmarking has potential as a means of encouraging submissions (see box below).

User generated content

You can help users create their own content. We encourage participation in discussions and blogs on development issues through *Siyanda* and the *Eldis Community site*.

Networks and networking

Make sure you get out and about. Draw on personal networks, participate in e-forums, visit people in their offices. At IDS, we get involved in different networks to find the right range and balance of material. Attending relevant events, conferences, roundtables, NGO forums and donor meetings are also great ways to find new contacts and sources. For example, *Livelihoods Connect* draw on their network of practitioners for content and BRIDGE is part of the UK Gender and Development Network through which it tries to maintain dialogue with professionals in the field.

Experts and advisory boards

Some of our services commission written work from research, academic and thematic specialists and consultants. *id21*, for example, searches for a guest editor and an academic advisor to provide expert input on a particular topic being covered in *id21 insights*.

Using personal connections is often the best way of finding experts. We locate people to work with through our partners, external links and close colleagues within IDS. For example, HDI have a panel of experts from DFID's Health Resource Centre (HRC) that recommend content. BRIDGE will sometimes send out a call for contributors to their networks for its *Cutting Edge Packs* – they select experts to work with, based on their CV (Curriculum Vitae). GSDRC keep an ever growing list of experts it contacts for input into helpdesk queries. Remember sometimes a simple Google search can bring up authors you could contact.

Content partners

Unlike many other intermediaries in the I-K-Mediary Network, IDS does not have formal content partners – although recently *Eldis* has formed agreements with publishers that allow it to reproduce its material on a CD-ROM⁶. Experience of the I-K-Mediary Network members suggests that formal agreements can be useful particularly if knowledge producers are reluctant to make their work available online. However they rarely result in knowledge producers submitting material to their services.

Content exchange agreements

The IDS Knowledge Services have a content exchange agreement with the Global Development Network (GDNNet) portal. This allows us to share large volumes of information about research material. Technical issues permitting, we hope to enter into similar partnerships in the future as they allow greater flows of information between services, draw on relative strengths of each and avoid duplication of effort.

WEB 2.0: USING NEW PARTICIPATORY WEB TOOLS TO HELP CONTENT COME TO YOU

Web 2.0 tools that help web-based content to 'travel' without effort have huge potential for knowledge and information intermediary work.⁷ Here we focus on tools for identifying and aggregating content.

RSS FEEDS

Feeds can be used to generate lists of content from which to select what you want. You can use a feed reader to monitor multiple feeds. Try Google Reader (www.google.com/reader). Encouraging knowledge producers to develop RSS feeds could be a useful investment and help you find content more easily in the long-term.

TAGGING

We use social bookmarking tools such as *delicious* (www.delicious.com) to manage lists of possible content and share this with colleagues. *Eldis* uses an agreed set of unique and identifiable tags relating to different thematic areas. You can also follow a particular tag or person to draw on what they are tagging. Social bookmarking can be a means of encouraging user submissions or recommendations.⁸

BLOGS AND TWITTER

Many blogs refer and link to other material which may be of interest. They are good for identifying trends and emerging issues.

These tools can be used to generate more automated services, by aggregating RSS feeds directly onto a public website, for example. We are finding this is great for bringing together large quantities of content but that editorial selection, synthesis and sign posting are required to make sense of it and add value.

⁵Thanks to Dr Sham Pujar, Deputy Librarian at the Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research (IGIDR) for sharing details of these tools via the I-K-Mediary Network

⁶These agreements are based on a version of Creative Commons licence <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

⁷We do not explain the tools themselves, please visit www.web2share.pbworks.com for more information

⁸A new initiative called *Focuss.Info* <http://www.focuss.info/> is based around this principle

5

HOW DO WE UPHOLD QUALITY ON A DAY-TO-DAY BASIS?



The IDS Knowledge Services have a diverse approach to upholding editorial quality on a day-to-day basis. There are lots of dependencies and grey areas which make it difficult to decide what content is included or excluded. Much depends on your staff's knowledge of the topic and their editorial decisions as they source and select documents (see Section 6 on staff).

How do we decide which documents to include or feature within our services? How do we select one document over another? Clearly, Sections 3 and 4 go some way to narrowing down the choice: by this stage we know which topics we want to focus on, which organisations we are interested in, what types of documents we would like to feature and material we could include.

In addition, each service has selection criteria, a fairly detailed check list of questions (linked to our values in Section 2), which we use to try to establish the quality of a document. We will skim read a document trying to answer some of these. Reading the executive summary, the list of contents, the introduction and conclusions is usually enough. Examples of questions we ask ourselves when selecting material include:

- Is it topical and does it challenge or push boundaries? Does it have something interesting or new to say?
- Is it well written? Does it have a good structure? If a document is badly organised and difficult to read this will make it more difficult for users to read and more difficult for staff to write a summary of.
- Is it useful and relevant to our target audiences with clear practical recommendations, lessons or conclusions?
- Are there clear policy implications? We expect the author to have identified and articulated these within the document. We do not feel we are qualified to devise these ourselves.

- Is it from a publisher, author or organisation based in the South? Does it raise the profile of under-reported topics, countries or regions?
- Is the methodology sound? This is a difficult area, and in some respects we rely on the reputation of the author, institute or type of document to back this up (for example, is it peer-reviewed, for health information especially?). Generally speaking we don't feature opinion pieces, or if we do they are labelled differently (for example, *id21 Viewpoints*).
- Does it come from a reputable organisation? This is also a difficult area, but we wouldn't use a report written by someone with no organisational affiliation, or again if we do, it would be labelled differently or would be posted on the Eldis Community site.
- Was it published recently (within the last 12-18 months, unless the document is a key text which has just become known or is on a new topic on which there isn't much in the database)?

The above list is not exhaustive, neither is it prioritised, as each service will give different weight to each question. It is

important to know what your audiences expect. We are moving towards featuring more content from organisations in developing countries, which may require us to rethink our criteria for inclusion. And with user-generated content on the Eldis Community site or *id21 Viewpoints*, there is flexibility.

USEFUL RESOURCES

EDITORIAL POLICIES AND GUIDELINES

Examples of online editorial policies and guidelines from the IDS Knowledge Services, other development portals and media organisations in the UK:

- Eldis www.eldis.org/go/contribute/editorial-policy
- id21 www.id21.org/id21-info/editorial-policy.html
- OneWorld <http://uk.oneworld.net/article/view/32212/>
- GDNnet www.gdnet.org/cms.php?id=kb_editorial_policy
- BBC www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/edguide/
- The Guardian www.guardian.co.uk/guardian/article/0,5814,642387,00.html

WIKIPEDIA

Content criteria, editorial management and quality review processes. Handy if you are thinking about how to manage user-generated content.

http://ig.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:About#Contributing_to_Wikipedia

USING THE INTERNET FOR RESEARCH

A dossier on how to use the internet for research on development, assessing quality of research and tips and training resources to support your information literacy skills. By Eldis.

www.eldis.org/go/topics/dossiers/using-the-internet/

6

WHAT STAFF AND STRUCTURES DO WE USE?

At the heart of the IDS Knowledge Services are our editorial staff. They are responsible for undertaking or overseeing the sourcing, selection, commissioning, creation and review of the content within our services.

We have worked hard to set up policies and structures that support editorial processes, although editors' decisions are ultimately subjective. It is important to have staff who are able to take responsibility for the day-to-day choices they make.

Every organisation is different. We recognise that many teams will consist of one or two people – ours range from two people to eleven. Here we share lessons we have learned about staffing and structures that may be useful when setting up effective delivery systems whatever the size of your team.

STAFF CHARACTERISTICS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Key characteristics

Key characteristics required across an editorial team include:

- passion for and experience of the subject matter
- networking skills
- willingness to learn, try new things and think creatively within the role
- familiarity with technical communication tools such as the internet for sourcing information
- ability to write and edit and attention to detail.

Technical programming skills are less important. Editors can learn how to use a content management system or input basic coding on the job. In our experience, it can be a challenge to find people with both sets of skills.

Divisions of responsibility

Subject Editors are responsible for networking, maintaining contacts in their field, sourcing, selecting and commissioning content, and working with external experts. They will write and edit summaries and synthesis products⁹, but may well outsource some of this work to freelancers. Our two largest service teams have Senior Editors who oversee and support editorial decisions in their teams across the range of subjects covered.

STRUCTURES

Levels of decision-making

Editorial structures and processes need to match the product, and decisions need to be taken at the right level. A service that requires senior management or editorial board approval of every piece of content, is extremely inefficient. Senior management can help set up editorial policies and values, but should give staff the freedom to implement these.

Editorial policies

Each of our services has developed its own editorial policies to support and uphold editorial decisions and selection criteria. Eldis has one broad editorial policy and individual policies for each thematic area. id21 has a broad editorial policy backing up its selection criteria and processes, described in Section 5. Strong guidelines provide support to editors and ensure consistency across the service.

Organisation of editorial staff

Organising staff into thematic teams, for example, around human development or natural resources, in our experience, delivers a better product or service.

Working alongside colleagues on similar themes helps staff understand the issues and linkages across related areas better.

It also helps them to build and maintain the networks they need to deliver and market high quality services. Being able to share and bounce ideas off each other (in shared offices ideally) is highly motivating and breeds confidence. At IDS, strong thematic links between editors and academics working on similar themes – through monthly thematic meetings for example – has been hugely beneficial, resulting in innovative and higher quality products.

Enabling yet accountable environment

Editors need editorial autonomy as well as the freedom to pursue topics or issues they think are interesting. The boundaries need to be clear, however, with mechanisms in place to ensure that editors are accountable for the decisions they make. All our services' teams have regular editorial meetings. Eldis editors, for example, meet weekly and have to justify to colleagues why they would like to see a particular feature on the front page of the website.

Creating spaces for regular discussion of editorial decisions and how they uphold the team's values is important.

We also have an Editors Working Group set up to share good practice across our services.

Expert external input

External input is important if you seek to overcome the potential for individual or institutional bias within your service and to broaden the pool of knowledge and expertise you wish to draw upon. Over the last ten years we have drawn on expert input in different ways: id21, for example, uses external subject editors to:

- suggest topic areas and sources of content
- select the 'best' from a long-list of material drawn up by id21 editors
- recommend content based on their knowledge and experience of the topic.

This approach can be expensive and time consuming to manage, however. For this reason, we are now trying to encourage external advice on a voluntary basis although this may result in less extensive input. With substantial, resource intensive products, such as *BRIDGE Cutting Edge Packs* or *id21 insights*, we continue to pay external editors for advice.

⁹Please note the writing aspect is not covered in this "How We" Guide but is mentioned here for context.

7

HOW DO WE REVIEW OUR SERVICE QUALITY?



All IDS Knowledge Services have developed selection criteria and policies to uphold editorial quality, as outlined in previous sections. We also have a range of qualitative and quantitative approaches for monitoring whether these day-to-day selections live up to our editorial values. Regular monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is essential to check that outcomes, targets and user needs are being met, and to feed into future improvements.

Quantitative monitoring of our collection

It is easy to monitor the *quantity* of material in our collection by running database reports; it is harder to quantitatively monitor the more abstract, value-based aspirations we hold such as *diversity* or *quality*.

To do this systematically entails recording or coding specific attributes of the material such as the source and type of material (for example, peer reviewed or grey literature) when adding content to databases. This is particularly difficult to do retrospectively, i.e. after databases have been created and material added.

In setting up a new service, we recommend that you think hard about what values it will be important to monitor quantitatively, identify reasonable or proxy indicators for those values, and factor them in to both database creation and staff training. However, don't collect data you will not use as it adds extra time to inputting processes.

Quantitative approaches are limited in what they can tell you and are not usually sufficient on their own. You will also need a range of qualitative data to tell you how you are doing.

Qualitative monitoring and evaluation

We encourage qualitative feedback from our users, usually in the form of email, web-based or print surveys, and find that the most useful data for evaluating editorial quality comes from the following types of open-ended questions:

- What do you most like about [product Y]?
- How can we improve [product Y]?
- Please give an example of how information from [service X] has influenced or contributed to your work.

Recently, we have begun to code responses to these questions more systematically to help us make more sense of the answers. We code our data in relation to the kinds of outcomes we hope to see and in relation to the editorial values we want to uphold. For example, if a respondent says that they value the range of perspectives they can access through our services, we would code this as relating to our value of diversity. Doing this will help us to quickly access the data we need when learning about our services.

External advisory groups

Some services have external editorial advisory boards to provide overall advice and feedback on our services and products. BRIDGE uses an International Advisory Committee, formed of a wide range of practitioners and policy workers from different regions, to feedback on their impact and performance. They conduct interviews and assessments with selected members.

id21 also set up an Editorial Advisory Group five years ago comprising eight academic advisors with expertise and knowledge in most subject areas covered by id21. This group met once a year and gave invaluable advice on id21's selection criteria, sourcing practices, editorial policy and quality. id21 also commissioned the group to do certain pieces of work, for

example, reviewing *id21 insights*. Though useful in helping establish and maintain quality on the supply side, it was an expensive exercise, and as academics the group did not see things from a user's perspective.

In response to this our services may set up remote (via email or a Web 2.0 platform) Readers' Panels or groups of users in each of our target countries, to provide us with feedback about hot topics in their country and the kind of information and themes users are likely to be interested in.

How do we learn and improve?

Pausing to review and reflect on what we do and discussing how to improve editorial quality based on M&E feedback is clearly a very important part of any learning process.

At IDS, we are still trying to improve our M&E practice and get it right. We respond to survey and *ad hoc* feedback relating to editorial quality, and we discuss and prioritise possible responses or changes we should make to products and services. We are beginning to experiment with other approaches, for example:

- We are now analysing M&E data in terms of what users particularly value, including aspects of editorial quality, and will do follow-up interviews with users who have provided interesting responses we'd like to find out more about. The interviews will focus on the outcomes of their information use, but we will also explore editorial quality issues.
- We are considering asking users to tell us how we could improve our performance against our values and asking users to rank how important our values are to them. This may provide different data to that provided from the qualitative approach outlined above.

This is work in progress and we will share our learning from our M&E work as it unfolds.

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