Mekong River Commission
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Foreword by the CEO

We live in a 24/7 news environment today – an environment where the MRC is competing with many other organisations in putting forward its opinions and messages, and communicating with its key stakeholders.

Whether dealing with governments, civil society, the private sector, international donors or other influencers, our effectiveness as an organisation is highly dependent on how well we communicate.

That’s why this communications handbook is so important to the MRC. It’s through this handbook and the skills and knowledge within that we can become better as an organisation in shaping the agenda, disseminating our unrivalled body of scientific and technical knowledge, and being a world-class river organisation that serves all our members.

At a time of considerable change within the organisation, this handbook is designed to give the staff of the Secretariat and National Mekong Committees greater confidence in the crucial act of communicating.

I welcome this handbook and look forward to it being a vital tool internally as we continue to expand and improve our communications activities throughout the region and worldwide.

I would like to acknowledge the SIDA, World Bank, and GIZ for making this handbook possible.

Thank you.

Sincerely,
Dr. Pham Tuan Phan
Chief Executive Officer
Using the MRC Communications Handbook

1

- Why is a handbook needed?
- What is the objective of the handbook?
- What should the handbook be used for?
- Who should use it?
- With this handbook, can I now consider myself an expert?
Why is a handbook needed?

As an international body committed to coordinating work across many sectors, the effectiveness of the MRC and National Mekong Committees (NMCs) is dependent on communicating with its stakeholders - the governments, civil society, and private sectors of the Mekong nations as well as donors and key influencers further afield.

To date, however, the MRC and NMCs have had a mixed record in communicating their achievements and value to external audiences. The result is that – compared to other organisations, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) – the MRC has a relatively low profile in the region.

It’s for this reason that this handbook has been developed – what it is hoped will be a vital tool in helping members of the MRC and NMCs improve their communications and through this handbook increase understanding and recognition of the MRC in the basin and internationally. This is particularly important with the current decentralisation at the MRC and growth in the responsibilities of NMCs.

The Communications Handbook – Key Goals

- Promoting a clear vision & consistent messaging.
- Standardising messages & outreach activities.
- Capacity-building.
- Quality control for communications products.
- Guiding the MRC, NMCs and related national agencies on all communications activities.

What is the objective of the handbook?

This communications handbook is a highly practical ‘how to’ tool that will help the MRC, NMCs and member countries across all their communications activities. It has been developed with the goals being:

- To enable the MRC, NMCs and related national agencies to promote a clear vision of the MRC and consistent messages to the media.
• To facilitate the standardisation of messaging and outreach activities.
• To provide capacity building tools for relevant spokespeople when dealing with the media as well as key stakeholders and partners. In turn, this will lead to the empowering of staff.
• To ensure quality and adherence to the highest of standards for all MRC communications-related products.
• To provide guidance to the MRC, NMCs and related national agencies on different communications activities from social media campaigns to organising events to other multimedia activities. To this extent, the handbook will cover more than just dealing with the media.

In summary, this communications handbook will support the MRC in implementing its communications strategy and the goal of promoting “the MRC as a world class river basin organisation that serves the peoples of its Member States in their need to sustainably develop the water resources of the Mekong River Basin, so as to reduce poverty while maintaining essential environmental services.”

The handbook will also meet the two-fold role of the MRC in terms of communications: i) as a platform for the four member countries to enhance dialogue and collaborate for the sustainable development of the river basin; and ii) as a knowledge hub on basin issues, providing scientific, unbiased technical information/knowledge to regional policy-makers in order that they can make informed decisions on the management and development of the basin.

What should the handbook be used for?

The MRC is a world-class river basin organisation based on science and technical expertise that provides crucial input to policy-making along the Mekong. The problem is that not everybody else in the outside world shares this view and has the same understanding. This handbook aims to rectify this and ensure that the MRC’s messages are heard loud and clear in the outside world as well as internally.

To this end, this handbook is designed as an important tool to anyone who is communicating with the outside world or even within the MRC. Whether writing a press release, presenting at a conference, writing a report, submitting a Facebook post, or sitting down to a meeting with NGOs, this handbook will provide invaluable information to support MRC staff in their day-to-day activities.
Who should use it?

Essentially everyone who is linked to the MRC – whether it be the communications team, senior managers, technical experts, NMCs or member countries.

Of course, not every section will be relevant to particular roles (not everyone will be writing a press release or speaking to the media, for example) but some sections will be relevant to everyone. The purpose of this handbook is to be an easy to use reference document that can be referred to when necessary. It will also ensure that knowledge and a basic platform for communications will remain as people come and go within the MRC and NMCs.

With this handbook, can I now consider myself an expert?

No. While the handbook is designed as a training and capacity building tool and provides valuable advice on communications, it doesn’t do the whole job. It is recommended that the sections, such as presentation skills and media interviews, be followed up by practical face-to-face training that includes role plays where skills are put into practice. Practice – as will be stated throughout this handbook – is key!

It’s also important to stress that the MRC as an organisation will always have evolving guidelines as to communications activities. Such guidelines will need to be kept in mind when using this handbook. The communications team can provide further advice here. In general, internal processes as to who should communicate and to whom will need to be further developed within the MRC and hopefully at some stage will be incorporated into this handbook.

No communications can be fully successful unless it is underpinned by a proper strategy. Creating such a strategy is therefore a logical first area to cover in this handbook and something that the MRC and NMCs will be focusing on in all their activities, in particular in their relationships with the media and the importance of putting in place a media relations policy to deliver coherent messages.
Whether it be the launch of a significant piece of technical research, the dissemination of results from a workshop or a major policy shift within the MRC, every time the MRC wants to convey something to the outside world (or indeed within the MRC), it should put in place a communications strategy.

Of course, each and every communications strategy will be different with varying objectives and audiences. This being said, however, all good communications strategies will require the following key building blocks.

- Setting objectives
- Defining audiences
- Agreeing messages
- Tactics
- The importance of measurement
- Timelines & responsibilities
Setting objectives

What is one trying to achieve? What audience is being targeted? How will one know if the goals have been met?

A communications strategy can only be successful (and clear that it has been successful) if there is a stated set of goals.

Why is one engaging in communications activities and what does one hope to achieve? It sounds like a simple question but many communications activities don’t know what they want to achieve at the outset, resulting in a lot of wasted time and money.

Typically the objectives for the MRC, for example, would be around engaging effectively with stakeholders, demonstrating the success of the MRC’s work, ensuring people understand what they do, influencing river basin policy, and initiating behavioural change. When putting together a communications strategy, it’s necessary to be clear about the objectives.

Designing a Communications Strategy

1. Set objectives.
2. Define audiences.
3. Agree messages.
4. Decide on tactics.
5. Agree measurements.
6. Define timelines and responsibilities.

SPECIFIC

Make sure that the objectives are not too general. If they are too general – ‘increase awareness towards water resources issues in the Mekong’, for example, or ‘disseminate the results from the workshop’ – they are going to be difficult to measure. Make it clear what should be achieved and what behaviours or policies the programme is intended to change.
**MEASURABLE**

*Such objectives must be clearly defined and measurable.* Ask questions such as – What particular views or set of behaviours do I want to change? Is it to improve public policy on river planning, for example, or increase the focus on safety in navigating the Mekong? Is it to advance knowledge on an issue such as flood management or mitigation and improve people’s quality of life? The more specific the objectives are, the easier they will be to measure.

**OPTIMAL**

*Conduct a situation analysis.* Another valuable tool at this stage of a project is to conduct a SWOT analysis where one looks at Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT). This will help feed into specific objectives. How, for example, can threats be turned into future opportunities? How can the MRC’s strengths be leveraged? The accompanying illustration shows an example of a SWOT analysis for the MRC.

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### SWOT-ANALYSES

**STRENGTHS**

- Members’ commitment to cooperation.
- Technical knowledge.

**WEAKNESSES**

- Infrequent engagement with stakeholders.
- Focus of engagement limited to member countries & donors.

**OPPORTUNITIES**

- Structure and decentralisation.
- Expanded role of NMCs.

**THREATS**

- External misperceptions.
- Vulnerability to negative comments from media and civil society.
- Donor fatigue.

*An example of a SWOT analysis*
Defining audiences

It’s crucial to define whom you want to communicate with. That way you can tailor your communications message accordingly. It’s vital that the communications you are delivering actually matter to the audience receiving them. The MRC, the NMCs and member countries have a number of different audiences they must communicate to – all with different characteristics, demographics and needs. These might include member country governments, donors, local communities, the private sector and NGOs. All these audiences will need to be communicated to via different approaches and different messages.

**STRONG OBJECTIVES**

- I want to increase the MRC’s profile as a leader in integrated water resources management through the media, industry events and other communications channels.
- I want to change the way villages in Northern Thailand access flood information.
- I want to position our new CEO and NMCs as knowledge leaders on riparian issues through presentations at key government events and Op-Eds in national newspapers.

**WEAK OBJECTIVES**

- I want to increase general awareness towards the MRC.
- I want to disseminate the results from our latest workshop.
- I want to create a higher public profile for NMCs.

In addition, understanding the languages most comfortably spoken by target audiences will also be important when developing tactics for communications campaigns.

With the further ‘riparianisation’ of the secretariat along with the decentralisation of many responsibilities to the NMCs, the translation of communications tools into Khmer, Lao, Thai and Vietnamese is likely to become more common.
Agreeing messages

The third element of any communications strategy is to communicate a small set of very clear, concise and ideally memorable ideas – what are called messages. Such is the importance of messaging that Chapter 3 will cover these in more detail. No communications plan can be fully successful without well-honed and compelling messages.

One important point relating to the MRC is that all messages and communications materials for external audiences need to identify clearly who the MRC and NMCs are and what they do. Too often in the past, there was a legalistic focus on when the MRC was established, how and by whom, without clearly stating what the MRC is and does. Further details on how to craft specific messages is found in Chapter 3.

KEY AUDIENCES FOR THE MRC AND NMCS

- Government agencies and decision-makers.
- Elected officials at different levels.
- Dialogue partners.
- Development partners & regional bodies.
- The general public (local, regional & international).
- Affected groups, community groups.
- Civil society/NGOs.
- The private sector.
- The media.
- Youth.
- Scientific & academic communities.
- Internal audiences within MRC.
Tactics

The next step in developing a communications strategy is to focus on tactics – the activities to undertake in order to achieve the objectives. How will you go about reaching your audiences? What activities will you undertake to convey your messages and meet your objectives?

Much of this communications handbook will look at the different tactics one can implement as part of a communications programme – from media relations through to social media and local communications.

What is important to stress is that the truly successful and high-impact communications programmes tend to have a multi-vehicle communications approach using a blend of different tools. That way the audiences can be reached in many different ways. It’s also important to think of your audience at all times when selecting your tactics and ask yourself how big an influence each communications vehicle is likely to have. If you are targeting a local community with poor internet access, for example, social media is unlikely to be very effective!

The importance of measurement

A communications programme can’t be proven to be successful unless measurement mechanisms are put in place. That way, one can work out what went well, what went wrong, and what can be improved in the future. Typical measurements might include:

**ANALYSIS OF MEDIA COVERAGE**

An analysis of media coverage and how often the key messages are disseminated. This would require a good media monitoring service. It’s essential here that quantity is not confused with quality. Determine if your media coverage reflects the messages you are trying to convey and what coverage is positive and what is neutral. You also need to evaluate the publication and its readership and the specific audience you are reaching. The accompanying indicators on page 19 shows how you could score media coverage.
**SURVEY**

A survey of a specific community of people and whether they have changed behaviour as result of the communications. This can be conducted in person or on the telephone or even via an internet-based survey company such as SurveyMonkey. Make sure that local language surveys are considered. The role of NMCs could also be important here.

**SOCIAL MEDIA**

The number of people following the MRC on Facebook or Twitter as a result of a communications campaign. You can also evaluate the discussions on social media platforms. How positive are people towards the MRC? One could do a similar analysis as one does for media coverage.

**WEB ANALYTICAL INFORMATION**

Web analytical information showing who has accessed the MRC website to download a specific report. Distribution figures for research publications and sales could also be measured in order to judge the effectiveness of launching a piece of research. One might also consider analytics tools, such as Google Analytics.

**FOCUS GROUPS**

A series of focus groups or in-depth interviews measuring perceptions of the MRC and how the MRC is changing as a result of the communications.
Creating a Successful Communications Strategy

**Timelines & responsibilities**

Finally, in order for a communications programme to be successful, it must have a clear timeline, identifying when each activity will happen, who will be responsible for them, and project milestones along the way. This will ensure that deadlines do not slip and everyone is aware of their responsibilities. The appointment of a campaign leader is a good idea as well.

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**MEASURING MEDIA COVERAGE:**

- **Very positive:** headline; positive mention of the MRC; no negative components.
- **Positive:** positive headline; positive mention of the MRC; no negative component.
- **Neutral:** mention of MRC: no negative or positive component.
- **Negative:** negative headline; criticism of MRC; MRC comment included.
- **Very Negative:** negative headline; overall criticism of MRC; no MRC comment included.
Putting in Place the Right Messages

Putting in place the right messages is central to any communications strategy and subsequent programme.

Without messages, no communications plan can be a success.

- What are messages?
- What makes a good message?
- Crafting a message
- The importance of consistency & repetition
- Proof points
What are messages?

Messages are the essential idea(s) that you want to communicate. Messages are what make the MRC, NMCs and member countries be taken notice of. Messages are essentially a statement or claim. For example, ‘x is a problem and y is a solution’ or ‘the work of the MRC is valuable because…’

Every communications plan should be based around a series of messages. Such messages should permeate and act as the guiding principle for all communications activities – whether it is media interviews, press releases, external materials or speeches, or posts on social media.

What makes a good message?

1. **KEEP IT SIMPLE. LESS IS MORE.**

A message should be a clear and compelling statement that stands out from everything else that is competing for the audience’s attention. By far the most important thing about the message is that it should be kept simple.

Watch the evening news and see which sound bites or comments are broadcast. They are not rambling, long paragraphs, but short, succinct messages.

The same goes for inviting an influential policy maker to an MRC event or meeting, for example. They are less likely to accept if the invitation includes many different and complex messages.

Taking what are complex subjects and turning these into easy-to-understand messages, however, is not a simple task.

2. **HAVE NO MORE THAN THREE MESSAGES**

It’s been scientifically proven that most people cannot process and remember more than three messages. If we cram too much information into what we want to communicate (or even have four messages rather than three), the audience goes away remembering nothing.
3. **KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE**

The third key principle behind message development is ‘know your audience’. You need to know what is already in your audience’s heads and what is going to interest them. That way you can design your messages accordingly.

4. **NO ACRONYMS**

The MRC, NMCs and member countries are dominated by acronyms, as is the development community as a whole. The problem is that the outside world doesn’t understand such acronyms. It’s therefore best to avoid acronyms, wherever possible. So no WWF, IUCN, IWRM etc. Make sure you spell things out – at least the first time you reference them.

5. **ASSOCIATE MESSAGES WITH INTERESTING INDUSTRY TOPICS**

It helps a message if it’s associated with key newsworthy industry topics. People are more likely to take notice.

6. **MAKE YOUR MESSAGE RELEVANT AND PERSONAL**

People only tend to take on new information when they are interested and motivated. To this end, make your messages as interesting, relevant and personal as possible. Real, up to date examples from individual experiences can really strengthen the message.

7. **BE COMFORTABLE IN CUSTOMISING YOUR MESSAGES**

It’s also OK to customise your message for specific audiences. While it’s unlikely to be that different, you also need to think on your feet and always ask yourself how you can make your message most relevant to the audience you are engaged with.

**Example**

The MRC is a world-class river basin organisation that serves the people of its Members states in their need to sustainably develop the water resources of the Mekong River Basin so as to reduce poverty while maintaining essential environmental services."

*The Mekong River Commission, Communications Strategy, July 2009*
What makes a strong message?

CRAFTING A MESSAGE

**BRAINSTORM**
A good starting point is to conduct a brainstorm with a few people (too many people might lead to delays and lack of agreement). Who are your target audiences? What do you wish to communicate with them and why and what are your objectives? These and other questions must be addressed.

**LOOK FOR SPECIFIC THEMES**
As you brainstorm, a number of specific themes will come forward. Try and keep these under different thematic headings and list your key messages around them.

**RANK & SELECT**
Decide which messages are most important. If you could only choose two messages, what would they be? You could ask the group to vote on specific messages.

**REFINE YOUR MESSAGES**
Once you have decided on your key messages, go back to the language and start refining it and your message. Is my message simple enough? Have I used too many words? Are my messages relevant and personal? How could they be improved? It’s also important that as part of your messages, you mention the specific role of the MRC, as that is not always clear in the wider community. The separate box on page 22 taken from the Communications Strategy provides examples of this.
The Key Rules of Messages

- Keep it simple.
- No more than 3 messages.
- Know your audience.
- No acronyms.
- Associate with interesting industry topics.
- Make your messages relevant and personal.
- Customise your message, if necessary.

The importance of consistency & repetition

Having crafted the perfect message, it’s now necessary to look at the execution of this message. There are two key rules here – consistency and repetition.

Firstly, consistency. It is vital that everyone internally delivers the same message(s) and audiences receive the same message from different sources on different occasions.

If your target audiences are hearing different messages from different people at different times, this is going to have a negative impact on the campaign taking away of clarity and focus. With many communications programmes using different vehicles – from media activities to speaking at an event to even lobbying – consistency is vital.

**Vision for The Mekong River Basin:** An economically prosperous, socially just and environmentally sound Mekong River Basin.

**Vision for the Mekong River Commission:** A world class, financially secure, International River Basin Organisation serving the Mekong countries to achieve the basin vision.

**Mission of the Mekong River Commission:** To promote and coordinate the sustainable management and development of water and related resources for the countries’ mutual benefit and the people’s well-being.
How can you ensure messages are consistent?

Many organisations use messaging handbooks – a set of messages that can be referred to when conducting interviews or presentations. One might also write bullet points on a small card.

Messaging handbooks would tend to include the following: i) an overview of the key messages; ii) a list of target audiences; iii) customised messages for these audiences; and iv) proof point examples. They might also include a Questions & Answers (Q&As) document illustrating how the key messages can be incorporated into answers to common questions.

Secondly, there is repetition. Once one has agreed on the messages, try and weave these messages into all your communications. The average person must hear a message 5 to 7 times before he or she will remember it so don’t be afraid to repeat them – although don’t use exactly the same language each time, of course!

Conducting a Messaging Workshop Brainstorm

Key Questions to Ask

Analysing the Current Situation
- What are our internal strengths? What are our key differentiators? Can we prioritise?
- What other organisations are we up against in our specialist areas? How successful are they at getting their messages out?
- What do our stakeholders think of us? How can we improve this perception?

Defining Your Audience
- Who are our most important audiences? What are they interested in? What is their current perception of the MRC?
- Are there any trends or commonalities? Are there any knowledge gaps?

So what messages can we use for the MRC?

While this handbook can’t provide a prescriptive overview of the MRC’s messages (although this may be done at a later date), this framework provides a useful starting point for developing messages for the MRC as well as providing a messaging framework for specific communications campaigns. Often the development of messages can also take place as part of a media training or messaging workshop.
Crafting Your Messages

• If you wanted your audience to know one thing about the MRC, what would this be? Can we prioritise?
• What would our one overarching message be? Can we back this up by additional messages?
• Are the messages sufficiently customised for our audiences?
• How can we convey the same messages in different ways?

Backing it up

• How can we back up what we are saying? Do we have examples? Facts, case studies etc..

Proof points

The final key element of messages is that of 'proof points'.

Messages ultimately have to be based on facts and information. Without them, the message is too abstract, too vague and is not going to be taken seriously by journalists or other audiences. Anyone can claim something. It’s how you back it up and the examples you point to, that can help your messages resonate.

So what do we mean by proof points? Proof points are facts, figures and research that back up what you are saying in your messages.

For example, one of the key messages for the MRC is that it is an ‘honest broker’, ensuring good policy decisions by member countries due to its broad research and technical base. In order to prove this, the MRC and NMCs need to address questions, such as examples of policies that were improved due to MRC research and the types of research that has led to an improved understanding of the Mekong basin. These are proof points.

Some further advice on proof points:

• Ensure that your proof points are results-focused. Make sure they are not too abstract or too general.
• Use anecdotal information. A good story is always effective.
• Use case studies wherever possible as proof points. Case studies will be looked at in greater detail in Chapter 4.
Dealing with Media: Communications Opportunities with Print, Radio & TV

For many communications strategies, the media is a key vehicle and tactic for disseminating messages and meeting objectives. Let’s take a look at some of the different ways of securing media coverage in more detail.

- What is news?
- Writing press releases
- Case studies – documenting success stories
- Op-ed & other article opportunities
- Letters to the editor
- Telephone & face-to-face interviews
- Broadcast interviews
- Radio interviews
- Press conferences
- Other means of communicating with the media
What is news?

Before we look at the different vehicles for disseminating news, it’s important to ask the question: ‘What is news and what will interest journalists?’

All potential news stories must pass the ‘so what?’ test. In such circumstances, headlines such as ‘Consultation Workshop Meets’ or ‘MRC Launches New Internal Guidelines’ can’t be considered sufficiently newsworthy for journalists.

A good way of deciding on whether ‘news is news’ is by looking at the following criteria: Impact, Relevance, Proximity, Timeliness and Human Interest.

- **Impact.** Impact refers to how big an impact the news will have on people’s lives, government policy or something else. What impact is this news going to have on people? Does it pass the ‘so what’ test?

- **Relevance.** Relevance refers again to what it means to your audience’s lives. How relevant is the news to what is going on in people’s daily lives, to the region, to the issues that journalists (and by extension their readers) really care about?

- **Proximity.** Proximity refers to how close the news is to your audience’s location. While the MRC is expected to provide comment on the Mekong, it will be less newsworthy if they decide to comment on the Nile in Africa, for example.

- **Timeliness.** Timeliness relates to the opportune time of the facts. The more recent the event, the more likely it is to be newsworthy. News gets old very quickly.

- **Human Interest.** Human interest can be closely linked to impact. What influence will this news have on specific people and their ways of doing things? In what way will this change their daily lives? The media tend to be more interested in what people are doing than organisations, so keep this in mind.
THERE ARE OTHER POSSIBLE NEWS HOOKS WE CAN CONSIDER WITH NEWS STORIES.

FOR EXAMPLE:

**Significant dates**

This could be an MRC anniversary day, or conferences and events, such as the World Water Forum and World Water Week, or particular world days, such as World Water Day (March 22), World Rivers Day (the last Sunday of September) or even local boat racing or water festivals in South East Asia (this could be very helpful for the NMCs in their communications activities). Such days can always be used as a potential news hook for media announcements. The chart on page 30 provides a list of such days.

**A survey or research**

Journalists are often interested in data, statistics and trends and these can form the basis for strong media coverage and news announcements.

**Link to existing news**

Another potential way of generating news is to comment on an existing news story or open up a new angle to journalists. The MRC, for example, has developed strong scientific knowledge on water resources management and has a number of experts who can provide comment to the media on specific topics. This expertise should be utilised as much as possible.
Newsworthy Days

2 February: World Wetlands Day
3 March: World Wildlife Day
22 March: World Water Day
5 April: Mekong Day
22 April: International Mother Earth Day
22 May: International Day for Biological Diversity
5 June: World Environment Day
12 August: International Youth Day
25 September: World Maritime Day
Last Sunday in Sept: World Rivers Day
13 October: International Day for Disaster Reduction
5 December: World Soil Day
Writing press releases

Press releases are probably the most common means of communicating with the media and a crucial element for boosting recognition of the MRC and NMCs and how MRC actions will help the people of member countries. Yet what makes a good press release? There are a number of things to take into account.

Keep the communications strategy in mind.

A press release is just one part of a communications strategy so keep in mind the steps we described in Chapter 2 (objectives, audiences, messages etc.).

- What do I want to achieve with this press release?
- What audiences am I targeting?
- What messages do I want to get across?

“More opportunities should be taken to put out press releases, which should report on events from a results-based perspective, focusing on how MRC actions will help the people of the Basin.”

*The Mekong River Commission, Communications Strategy, July 2009*

Find an angle.

The first thing that goes through a journalist’s mind when he or she reads a news release is always: ‘So what? Why should my readers care?’

Think hard about the key message and news angles you want to get across in a news release and make sure it’s results-focused. If you are struggling to find a newsworthy angle, you should question whether it’s worth doing the press release in the first place.
There’s no point in issuing a press release on a workshop which finished two weeks ago or announcing the appointment of a person who has already been in his or her post over three months! It’s important that the MRC is responsive and can write and submit press releases quickly.

Make sure you have a good headline.

Having a good headline is crucial to attract the journalist’s attention. Many journalists won’t go further than the headline so it’s essential to get him or her interested through a catchy and newsworthy headline.

Tell the whole story in the first paragraph.

You need to tell a summary of the whole story of the press release in the first paragraph. The rest of the press release will add to the basic structure. An easy way to remember is to use the five Ws (and one H): who, what, when, where, why (and how much). Who was involved? What happened? When did it happen? Where did it happen? Why did it happen? How did it happen?

Don’t say too much.

Some press releases can sometimes be up to 4 to 5 pages long! Only a journalist with a lot of stamina and plenty of time on their hands is likely to read this! As a rule, try to keep the press release to around 1 page. Position it as a kind of executive summary and you can always then provide supplementary information if need be.

Keep sentences & paragraphs short & punchy.

It’s important that the press release has a good flow to it. Short and punchy sentences and paragraphs (up to 3 sentences approx.) are recommended and try to keep your sentences to around 30-35 words.
Be direct. It’s OK to move away from the third person singular and talk about ‘we’ rather than ‘the MRC’. This is particularly important in quotes and makes things less rigid and more informal. Move away from old institutional language.

Include compelling quotes. Strong quotes are often likely to be taken out of the press release by journalists alongside the headline. Make sure that the quotes are in a user friendly, flowing and naturally spoken language. Avoid them being cumbersome or full of jargon. It’s also a good idea to have these quotes as far up the press release as possible. Try not to hide them.

No mistakes and professional presentation. Of course, it’s vital that the press release includes good grammar and correct spelling. Any press release that doesn’t adhere to this sends out highly negative impressions of the organisation. The MRC media style guide can help in ensuring consistency with press releases.

Remember the ‘Notes to Editor’ section. This is background information that is not necessarily important to convey in the main body content of the release but is important information to journalists, should they require more information on the MRC. The Note to Editors should also include a standard background paragraph describing the MRC.

Include a photo/illustration. A press release with a photo or illustration has a much better chance of being picked up by the media. Make sure you don’t email journalists 10 Meg files though. A good alternative option is to direct journalists to a URL on the website where they can download a high-resolution version of the photo. Try and make the photo as interesting as possible.
The effective distribution of a press release is, of course, also key. There’s no point in sending it to the wrong type of media who won’t be interested in the release.

It’s therefore important to give some thought to the media you are targeting and their readership. The types of media you are sending the release to will also influence some of the language and content in the release. A release to financial media or general media will be different from a release sent to the more technical media. It’s therefore important to develop and update media lists by category to ensure the effective dissemination of the release.

Once distributed, you must also give some thought on how to track media coverage. A lot of this can be done online by the MRC and NMCs. You might also want to consider media clipping services.

It’s also important to translate many press releases into the relevant local languages. If you stick to just English, you may miss out on a lot of local coverage. Ask yourselves who the target audience is for the press release and whether this covers local language publications.

Finally, it’s very helpful to have strong internal processes in order to help source possible news stories. Ask around and encourage people within the MRC and NMCs to suggest possible press release topics to the communications team. There are undoubtedly many accomplishments and successes within the MRC that not everyone knows about.
PRESS RELEASE

China Commits to Enhanced Cooperation with Mekong River Commission (MRC)

China to work with MRC on joint water flow fluctuation study on Mekong-Lancang River


The announcements came during the visit of China’s Vice Minister of Water Resources, HE Mr. JIAO Yong to the MRC Secretariat in Vientiane, Laos.

“The People’s Republic of China is a key partner to the MRC and we are delighted to be cooperating so closely on these two important projects,” said the CEO of the MRC, xxx. “We look forward to more joint collaborations over the coming months as we look to meet our shared goals of the sustainable management and development of water and related resources around the Mekong.”

The Mekong-Lancang River study will be a joint assessment of water level fluctuation at hydro-met stations in the Chiang Saen District of Chiang Rai Province in northern Thailand, and in Vientiane, Lao PDR.

Notes To Editors
The MRC is the inter-governmental organisation established to promote regional cooperation and facilitate dialogue on the sustainable management of the Mekong Basin among governments, the private sector and civil society. In 1996 the MRC held its first Dialogue Meeting with its Dialogue Partners, China and Myanmar.

For more information...
Jane Doe
mrcmedia@mrcmekong.org
* An example based on a real event and press release at the MRC
CHECKLIST - PRESS RELEASE

- A good angle
- A concise headline
- A correct date
- The What, When, Where, How & Who in first paragraph
- Short sentences & paragraphs
- No jargon
- No spelling mistakes
- A strong quote
- An accompanying photo
- Notes to editors
- Translation requirements

PRESS RELEASE

HEADLINE

SUBHEAD


Good quote as far up the release as possible.

Main body of the release

Notes To Editors

For more information...
Case studies – Documenting Success Stories

Case studies are a valuable vehicle for disseminating information to the media (as well as to other audiences). They are the telling of a story as to how the MRC and NMCs are making a difference to people’s lives.

Case studies are a concise and engaging summary of a project that identifies a problem or challenge that needs to be addressed, outlines how this challenge was tackled, and finally highlights the benefits brought to the end user – whether it be a government department, an NGO, local community, or another stakeholder.

The documenting of success stories as case studies is a vital tool that can be used not just with the media, but also in all other dissemination activities, such as in presentations, newsletters, the website, blogs and other vehicles. Such case studies also point to the proof points we mentioned in the messaging section (Chapter 3) and are a powerful way to educate MRC audiences.

A RESULTS-BASED CASE STUDY

As part of a fisheries management project for Nam Ngum communities in Lao PDR and another project in 2007 with the Living Aquatic Resources Research Centre, the MRC Fisheries Programme has provided training on gender awareness and sensitivity. In addition, they have provided technical training on fish preserving and processing.

Family incomes have since risen to about two dollars a day and the division of labour has changed. Men help women do the housework including fish processing and taking care of the children. The women now have more time to work on fish processing, storing fish and keeping it fresh. Living conditions have also improved as women have been trained to pay more attention to hygiene and sanitation.

* A Case Study, Catch & Culture Newsletter, April 2015
Here are 10 tips on securing and writing a successful case study:

1. **FINDING A GOOD CASE STUDY**
   It’s not as easy as you might expect to find good success stories. Write down any potential case studies as they come up and ask around – especially ask the beneficiaries of projects. Keep a case study mindset whenever you examine the results of a project. When a project is completed, see if it would be possible to write up a case study.

2. **AGREEING ON A CASE STUDY. BRING UP THE IDEA OF A CASE STUDY EARLY ON.**
   It’s important that the possibility of a case study is brought up with the end user as early as possible in the process – even before the project has started. In doing this, one also needs to make clear to the end user what’s in it for them in documenting such success stories. Some possible means of persuasion might include:
   - An **opportunity to share lessons learned** and ensure that the project can be replicated elsewhere.
   - The **opportunity for the end user to publicise something that is important to them**. Ask yourself how such a case study can align with their objectives. Examples of previous case studies should also be provided so that the case study partners know what to expect.
   - The opportunity to **partner with a high-profile organisation like the MRC**. This might help give credibility to an organisation or a local community and help with future funding.

3. **MAKE SUCH CASE STUDIES AS USER FRIENDLY AND EASY TO READ AS POSSIBLE.**
   Ideally they should be no more than 1 to 2 pages and if any longer, they should have a concise executive summary. The reader shouldn’t have to work too hard and read too many pages in order to find all the important information.

4. **THE FRONT PAGE SHOULD ALWAYS CLEARLY IDENTIFY THE PROBLEM/CHALLENGE, SOLUTION AND RESULTS**
   It shouldn’t be up to the reader to work hard to find this all-important information. Make it as easy for them as possible.
5. QUOTES FROM THE PEOPLE/ORGANISATIONS THAT HAVE BENEFITTED FROM THE PROJECT SHOULD BE INCLUDED.

These are a direct endorsement of the project’s success and can be easily used in other materials as well. A good quote counts for a lot.

6. USE PHOTOS.

As always, photos are invaluable. They can make the case study much more personal and engaging.

7. KEEP YOUR CASE STUDIES PERSONAL.

One of the main criteria of many success stories is to turn technical data into an engaging personal story. It’s important to put a human face on everything you document. What does the MRC’s research and activities mean to specific local communities?

8. GIVE THE APPROPRIATE CREDIT.

Make sure that you credit all organisations involved in a project, including the donors. It can establish enormous goodwill and can be potentially disastrous if you forget someone!

9. PROVIDE A CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION.

While case studies should be relatively short, always make sure you provide contacts for further information and the appropriate references for readers who are interested in finding out more.

10. SHARING A CASE STUDY.

Finally, when a case study is drafted, it’s important to share it with the right people. From a media perspective, you should send your case studies to interested journalists and in some cases write a press release around it. In addition, there are a host of other things you can do with such success stories. These could include:

- Posting on the website and in social media.
- Sharing with key partners, NGOs, government officials etc.
- Submitting your case study to conferences and workshops for possible presentations.
- Share the case study with staff and partners as a means of sharing best practices.
Op-Ed & other article opportunities

Opinion editorial (Op-Ed) opportunities are an excellent means of the MRC and NMCs putting into the public domain the issues they want to talk about. It’s these kinds of proactive communications that can help the MRC set the agenda and avoid being defensive. Such articles contain a specific point of view on a topical and timely issue. They can be targeted at a wide variety of media from international dailies, such as the Financial Times and Asia Wall Street Journal, through to national dailies and specialist media – in English and in local languages.

Some things to keep in mind:

- As mentioned previously, make sure the **article is topical** and links into an issue in the public’s mind. You should mention the topic early on as well – ideally in the first paragraph.

- **Have a strong beginning and end.** It’s vital that the opening hook grabs the reader’s attention. Otherwise they won’t read on. Similarly, you need to have a powerful ending. This might include a firm conclusion and/or a call to action.

- **Be prepared to write and submit fast.** If you want to align your Op-Ed piece to a particular news issue, you’ll need to submit quickly. Many issues have a very short news cycle. Writing and approval within the MRC or NMCs will need to be fast.

- Make sure the article is **concise and doesn’t ramble.** Op-Eds can vary from just 400 words to a more detailed 1,500 words in more technical publications.

- Make sure the articles **aren’t self-promotional.** Don’t talk about how wonderful the MRC is.

**QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF BEFORE AND WHEN YOU WRITE AN OP-ED:**

- Do I have a clear point to make? What is it?
- Who is likely to care? Who am I trying to convince here (the publication’s readership)?
- Is there substance to my argument?
- Do I have a strong beginning and an end?
- Am I being clear and is the tone of voice natural to me?
- Am I being conversational?
• **Use plain language and respect your reader.** Don’t assume that they are experts.

• **Articulate a clearly defined point of view.** Decide on the key message you want to get out of the article and stick to it. Don’t ramble.

• **Know your publication.** The general style of an Op-Ed can be very different depending on the publication. Make sure you do your research as to the publication’s readership and read other Op-Eds in the same publication.

• **Write in your own voice.** Don’t write in the way you feel important people write. Keep it as natural as possible.

• **Research your article.** To be successful, your article must be based around solid research. Make sure you cite all field research, statistics etc.

In some publications, it is also possible to look at the schedule of topics the publication in question will be looking at over the coming months and plan articles accordingly. These are called forward features lists.
Excerpts from Bangkok Post Op-Ed by

Jeremy Bird, Former CEO of MRC, 2010

As readers of this paper will know, much of northern Thailand and Lao PDR, southwest China, and some parts of Viet Nam are in the grips of one of the worst dry periods in recent history. This is reflected in unusually low river levels throughout the Mekong basin as well as in other major rivers such as the Red River in northern Viet Nam.

Strong opening and very newsworthy.

Analysis of the Mekong River Commission’s data reveals that the low water levels in the Mekong and its tributaries are the result of extreme natural conditions. For example, at Chiang Saen in northern Thailand close to the Chinese border, the 2009 wet season ended about one and a half months early and rainfall in both September and October 2009 was more than 30 percent less than average.

Citing data and MRC as an expert.

In Thailand, many media reports place the blame for low Mekong levels on the mainstream Chinese hydropower schemes and yet they operate in the same way, to store water during the wet season that can be used during the dry season.

Addressing issue of specific interest to Bangkok Post readers.

We are all aware of the negative effects that dams can bring on natural resources and the livelihoods of people that depend upon them. They have been widely reported in the media, by independent commissions, project evaluation studies and community experience. But this should not be translated into a view that all problems can be attributed to dams.

Non-institutional language. Addressing tough issues head-on.
More research needs to be done. The Mekong River Commission is engaging with China to better understand how dams and other human activities on the river impact on those downstream, as well as to model future changes, including the potential impact of climate change.

**Focus on the MRC and its proactive people.**

Countries of the region are not as familiar with drought management as with flood preparedness. Yet, with climate change effects likely to intensify both flooding and drought over coming years, it is an area where considerable attention is needed both at policy and practical levels.

**Focus on the MRC and its proactive people. Strong end and Call to Action.**

*Op-Ed from MRC published in The Bangkok Post, 16 March 2010*
Letters to the editor

Letters to the editor are another useful means of getting your key messages across. They can be used proactively for helping shape the debate or as a reactive tool in response to an article that is either factually incorrect or critical. Such letters can argue a point of view or express an opinion, agree or disagree with an article, or be used to dispute facts and figures. Some other things to consider when compiling a letter to the editor:

• If your letter is responding to a specific article, **make sure you write and send it as soon as possible** – no more than 48 hours after the original article has been published. This will increase the likelihood of it being published.

• Make sure that the letter is **informative, concise** and is not **overly defensive**. Letters to the editor tend to be around 125-150 words although - if there is a need to relay more points and issues, these can be extended to around 300 words (if the publication allows it).

• **Make your point and make it quickly.** Get straight to the point in your letter/email.

• **Read other letters to the editor in the same publication.** Letters to the editor pages tend to have different styles in different publications. Read other examples so you can get an idea on what the editor is looking for in terms of style, tone and length.

• When referencing a previously published article, **provide as much detail as possible (date, headline, page number, author etc.).** This is essential so the editor knows what article the letter is in response to.

• Ideally a letter to the editor should come from **a senior person at the MRC or within NMCs.** This will provide more credibility and increase the likelihood of it being published.

• **Use statistics.** Statistics can be a valuable means of capturing people’s attention and making a compelling point.
Letter to the Editor: Excerpts from Mekong Hydropower Development is Good

*Bangkok Post, 9 January 2007.*

I would like to respond to the article published in the Dec 25 edition of the Bangkok Post entitled, “New dam plan sparks warning”, which misrepresents my position with regard to hydropower development in China.

**Straight to the point and references article that the letter is responding to.**
The article was published following a meeting with representatives of Thai media in the MRC Secretariat in Vientiane on Dec 19.

As the CEO of the Mekong River Commission Secretariat establishes credibility. I wish to take this opportunity to present to the readers of the Bangkok Post Good to reference readers - the main audience a more balanced and constructive vision on the issue of transboundary impact of hydropower development projects. Good, non-emotive language. More research needs to be done.

The Mekong River Commission is engaging with China to better understand how dams and other human activities on the river impact on those downstream, as well as to model future changes, including the potential impact of climate change.

**Key message of letter - collaboration.**

During the meeting, I also said that while the potential local impact should always be properly addressed and mitigated, the overall downstream impact of hydropower dams on the Lancang in China is often exaggerated in the public opinion. Indeed, the total volume of water which can be stored behind the two existing dams, Manwan and Dachaosan, is at least 30 times smaller than the total volume of water flowing annually out of China in the Mekong River.

**Good use of statistics**

And although the storage capacity of the Xiaowan dam will be more important, it will still be at least four times smaller than the total annual flow.

...The Mekong River system still offers high potential for sustainable development in the sectors of agriculture, fisheries, hydropower, navigation, flood management, water supply and sanitation. And if we are to see the alleviation of poverty and an increase in the socio-economic welfare of the growing Mekong population, more developments are needed in all water-related sectors, including hydropower.

**Strong Call to Action.**
We are well aware that water resources development in such a large international river basin is not without risks and difficulties, but we are confident that with a constructive, trustful pragmatic attitude, promoting close cooperation between all countries of the Mekong Basin, we will be able to meet the challenge of an economically prosperous, socially just and environmentally sound river basin, for the benefit of all the Mekong people, especially the poorest.

Letter ending with an upbeat note.

Outlining the goal of the MRC

DR OLIVIER COGELS
CEO, Mekong River Commission Secretariat

Senior person

* Letter to the editor from MRC published in The Bangkok Post, 9 January 2007

Telephone and face-to-face interviews

Probably the most common means of disseminating information to journalists is through an interview – on the phone but occasionally face-to-face. Normally it is the journalist that calls requesting comments from the MRC or NMCs on an article that is being written.

Occasionally and hopefully more in the future, it might originate from a proactive invitation from the MRC to speak to journalists. One might consider journalist briefings around major MRC events, such as Council and Joint Committee meetings, for example.

How should such an interview – whether on the telephone or face-to-face – be handled?

Firstly, ask lots of questions... what information is the journalist looking to source? Who have they already spoken to? What will be the general tone of the article? What is their deadline?
In such circumstances, it might be appropriate to forward the request to the communications team to establish the parameters of the interview. Sometimes you can even request that the journalist send through a list of questions although this isn’t always going to be greeted favourably. Many journalists simply don’t have the time to write down their questions in advance.

What it is important to stress, however, is that you need to give yourself time. Don’t start answering the journalists’ questions immediately – no matter how much pressure you are under. Take a step back and prepare yourself for the interview. You are most likely to be in the position where you are pressurised to answer questions, when taking a phone call. Don’t feel the need to answer immediately. Call the journalist back although don’t take too long!

Of course, when it comes to the interview itself, you have no guarantee that the journalist will stick to the topics they supposedly agreed to. However, don’t despair. It’s still possible to control the interview and get your message across (we will talk more about this in Chapter 5). Remember, you have the information and you are the expert. The journalist still needs access to you and your expertise.

**OTHER TIPS FOR TELEPHONE OR FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEWS:**

- **Do your research!** This might well be the job of the communications team but it’s essential that the necessary research is carried out prior to the interview. Who are the readers of the publication? What level of technical knowledge does the journalist have? Who else has the journalist spoken to?

- **Act quickly.** While (as mentioned previously) you should not feel the need to answer someone’s questions immediately – if they call you on the telephone, for example – remember that such journalists are often under deadline so you’ll need to react pretty quickly.

- **Treat journalists with respect** – no matter how important or unimportant you believe the publication to be. One journalist working on a small publication may end up being the Development Correspondent for the Asia Wall Street Journal in the future!

- **Don’t assume the journalist is an expert.** It’s always useful to find out how much a journalist knows about your subject matter. ‘So how much do you know about integrated water resources management?’ Don’t be afraid to ask this and other questions.
• **Remain calm, confident and measured throughout the interview.** Never lose your cool and remain calm. Don’t let the journalist hurry you. There’s nothing wrong with pausing and taking a few seconds before giving your answers.

• **Use strong and lively language and short sentences so that your words can be edited easily.** You will probably only get a few sentences of your own quoted in a print article so focus on making these count and try and rehearse some good sound bites in advance.

• **Always tell the truth and admit if you don’t know something.** This might seem self-explanatory and established behaviour but is very important. Tell the truth! And if you don’t know something, admit it. It’s OK to say ‘I don’t know’. Whatever you do, don’t talk about something that you don’t feel confident about. If you are unsure about a specific fact or issue, you can always refer this to someone else.

• **And if you make a mistake, correct yourself immediately.** This is vital. If you don’t correct yourself, what you say might become public record and you will have a lot more questions to answer! Try and ensure there is no ambiguity in what you say and – if there is – make sure you clarify it as quickly as possible.

• **Work on body language.** Even if you’re not on television, body language is still important for face-to-face interviews. Sit up straight, look the interviewer in the eye and don’t cross your arms. Crossing your arms puts you on the defensive and gives the impression that you might have something to hide.

• **Structure your interview.** Just like a presentation, it’s important to have a structure in your mind for the interview with a strong start, some easily accessible facts and figures, and a strong conclusion. Of course, you’re going to need to be flexible and the journalist may take you in different directions to what you had in mind, but it’s still important to have a basic structure.

• **Keep it simple.** Just like messages, avoid getting bogged down in too much detail. If the journalist wants more detail, they will ask for it.

• **Avoid jargon and keep your language accessible.** Just as in messages, keep technical terms and acronyms to a minimum. This is the fastest way to lose a journalist!

• **Avoid processes and focus on action.** This is particularly important for the MRC and NMCs. Journalists won’t be interested in internal processes within the MRC or consultation workshops, institutions and procedures.
Dealing with the Media: Communications Opportunities with Print, Radio & TV

- They want to hear about the specific actions and results from the MRC. Try to focus on what behaviour the MRC is changing and tangible results. Case studies are very useful here.

- Don’t let journalists get away with loaded questions. A loaded question is where a journalist includes a very subjective slant to a question. For example, ‘Given the Lao government’s poor record on human rights, can we really trust them to look after communities around the Don Sahong dam?’ In such cases, if you don’t challenge this comment, your silence could be seen as agreeing with the statement. In such cases, you need to preface your answer with something like: ‘I’m not going to comment on those issues as it’s outside the MRC’s remit but what I would like to say is...’

- Don’t be afraid to have other resources available. For a telephone or face-to-face interview, it’s always a good idea to have back up – a technical person, for example. That person should be on standby to answer questions.

- Choose the right environment. For either a telephone or face-to-face meeting, it’s important to have the right environment. Don’t arrange a telephone interview when you’re on a train with poor mobile phone coverage, for example!

- And prepare! Above all, such interviews are about preparation. If you put in the work, it should be a valuable experience for you, the journalist and the MRC or NMCs. It’s fine to have notes with you during the interviews as well.
Broadcast interviews

Mention a broadcast interview – whether live or taped – and many people feel terrified at the thought. However, if you follow a set of basic rules (and ideally are media trained), it doesn’t need to be the ordeal you anticipate. It can in fact be an excellent means of promoting the MRC and NMCs. Here are some suggestions on preparing for and conducting a broadcast interview.

• First, **give yourself plenty of time to arrive and prepare.** You don’t want to be flustered at the outset, breathing heavily, sweating etc. Give yourself time to meet the production team and the interviewer, find out about the format for the programme etc.

• **Prepare and practice.** Just as in face-to-face or telephone interviews, there’s nothing wrong in asking in advance whether there are particular questions or subjects to prepare for. Also following on from the previous sections, practice the key messages you want to prepare. Full media training will also help in anticipating difficult questions and preparing your answers.

• **Remember you are the expert!** Perhaps more so than face-to-face and telephone interviews, you will often be interviewed by a generalist who will rarely have experience in your field and will be reliant on producers to do the research and prepare the questions. The result is that you will always know more than them!

• **Choose your words carefully.** As we have mentioned before, be as succinct and as compelling as possible. Choose your sound bites carefully. Make sure that you have some words and phrases that can be easily extracted.

**CHECKLIST - TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS**

• Call back immediately but don’t feel you have to speak to them there and then
• Establish how much time is available
• Find a quiet place
• Have other people available if more information is required
• **Storytelling.** Don’t forget the art of storytelling. If short and to the point, these can be highly effective in broadcast interviews.

• Ignore the camera and **focus eye contact on the interviewer.** That’s very important. It always looks strange if you bypass the interviewer and look directly at the camera.

• **Relax and speak naturally.** Speak in your normal conversational tone and try to appear as relaxed as possible. Avoid institutional language.

• **Stay calm** even if you are subject to tough questioning. You must never lose your temper.

• **Try not to be too wooden in your body language** but at the same time don’t over gesture. This is a difficult balancing act but can be done. Act as you would normally do when sitting opposite a friend, for example.

• **Sit up straight and don’t cross arms.** As mentioned previously, crossing arms makes you look defensive as if you have something to hide. Also don’t do anything that might distract the audience or undermine their trust in you, such as rocking or leaning on your chair.

• Don’t **use written notes.** These are OK for telephone or face-to-face interviews but not broadcast. They can also prove distracting.

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**CHECK LIST - FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEWS**

- Remember body language
- Keep eye contact
- Establish how much time is available
- Have other people available if more information is required
• **Use vocal inflection.** Try not to be too monotone in what you say. Make sure that if you are excited or passionate in something, your tone of voice reflects this. Practice is again vital here.

• **Make sure there is nothing in your hand** (a pen, for example) as it will be difficult not to fidget.

• And at the end of the interview, **don’t move suddenly.** Wait until the microphone has been taken off you. And never assume that you are off camera! The camera might still be running! The same goes for the microphone that might still be on your lapel.

**In terms of clothes and appearance, a few other things to take note of:**

• **Dress professionally.** You don’t always have to go for a suit and tie but don’t dress too casually – especially if you are representing the MRC or NMCs. Try and wear something that matches your role.

• **Don’t wear too outlandish or bright an outfit.** It can distract from what you’re saying. Bright outfits don’t always work so well on television.
Radio interviews

Radio is another medium that you may be asked to interact with journalists via. This might take place in the studio, on the phone or in radio cars. In this case, you can take notes and cards that include your messages. Many of the tips already described in this section should be adhered to here (with preparation again the most important). In terms of areas specific to voice and radio, some tips below:

- **Try to sound confident.** Don’t be too quiet as that might give the impression of timidity but at the same time don’t be too loud as that might come across as aggressive and arrogant. Again, it’s important to find that balance.

- **Put some energy into your voice.** Again, it’s good to sound as if you are passionate and enthusiastic.

- **Just as in a television interview, look directly at the interviewer.** Try to forget the microphone is there.

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**THE POWER OF BODY LANGUAGE**

- Make eye contact.
- Sit up straight.
- Gesture but not too much!
- Don’t cross your arms.
- Practice interviews when standing and sitting.

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- **Avoid stripes that can create interference on the screen.** Also, avoid blue, white and green outfits that can interfere with the background screen (that is often green).
- **Keep jewellery to a minimum.** Again too much jewellery can be distracting.

In terms of the content of the interview and how to handle the questions, refer to the face-to-face and telephone interviews sections. And finally, enjoy it! Broadcast interviews are often a lot better than you expect.
• **Find out how much time you will have on air** so that you can develop your answers accordingly.

• **Keep your mouth a consistent distance from the microphone.** Otherwise, you will sound as if you’re fading away and then getting louder.

• **If on the phone, make sure you are in a quiet room** with no likelihood of interruptions, such as from a mobile phone, colleagues, children etc.

• **Have a glass of water nearby.** There’s nothing worse than a dry mouth.

• **Remember the interviewer’s name and use it.** Perhaps not after every question but it helps establish a collaborative feeling to the interview and will impress the interviewer as well. Try to also consider the interview as an intimate conversation with one person rather than with thousands of listeners.

• **If you feel a mistake or stumble, don’t apologise.** Often listeners won’t have noticed. Also try and avoid ‘Umms’!
Press conferences

Press conferences still remain a popular way of disseminating information to the media. They are a good means of sharing information with the media simultaneously and creating a sense of excitement in regard to an important announcement. They also don’t necessarily have to just be hosted by the MRC but by NMCs in their host cities where they can promote the riparianisation of the organisation. Here are some tips on press conferences:

- Firstly, **don’t hold a press conference unless you are convinced of the newsworthiness of the announcement**. Press conferences can be a major logistical effort in terms of cost and people’s time so make sure that the news is of sufficient value and wouldn’t be better served through alternative vehicles, such as a press release. There’s nothing worse than spending days organising a press conference and then seeing only two journalists turn up. Furthermore, if it’s just a group of journalists that you would like to target, you may want to consider more informal, one-to-one press briefings.

- **Consider other forums as well**. There are other forums in addition to press conferences that should perhaps be considered. For example, seminars or roundtables are sometime an interesting means of discussing complex news in more detail.

- **Choose the right location**. Make sure that you’re holding a press conference in a city with a lot of media that can attend. You’re less likely to have as many journalists in Vientiane, for example, as Bangkok, which has a much larger journalist community including many foreign correspondents.

- **Make sure that journalists have an option of one-to-one interviews**. Some journalists are not keen on press conferences. They prefer a one-to-one environment where they can focus on specific issues of interest to them and where they can raise a series of follow-up questions and shape the conversation according to their own agenda. Make sure you provide this alternative around the press conference – either at the press conference venue or at an alternative location.

- **Give journalists notice**. Ideally you should give at least 10 days notice for a press conference although don’t expect journalists to focus on it until sometimes hours before. Journalists have a notorious short-term focus! It’s always worth following-up by telephone the day before the event to check if they are coming.
• **Draft a compelling media invitation.** Much like a press release, the media invitation needs to grab the journalist’s attention at the outset. This requires a sharp, strong headline and an overview of what they can expect to find out at the press conference (without giving too much away). If you have high-level speakers, make sure you promote this as well as the when and where in terms of logistical details.

• **Keep timing in mind.** Select the day and timing carefully. Make sure that it doesn’t clash with events and – in the case of daily newspapers, for example – give journalists time to meet their deadlines. To this end, morning starts are normally better.

• **Keep them brief.** Don’t let press conferences go on too long. You’ll lose the audiences’ interest. Ideally, no more than 30 minutes of presentations followed by a Q&A session.
• **Make sure there is an overriding topic and news angle to the press conference.** Don’t cover too much as it will dilute your messages.

• **Keep your speakers to a minimum.** Avoid having too many speakers. There is danger that it will confuse the journalists and again dilute the messages. Ideally, 1 or 2 people should convey your messages.

• **Make sure all spokespeople are media briefed.** This is crucial. All spokespeople should be comfortable with the media and have gone through media training. Press conferences can be unforgiving environments for those inexperienced in dealing with the media.

• **If you can’t answer a question, find someone who can.** Be helpful if you are unable to answer a question a journalist poses. Tell them that you will get back to them as soon as possible with an appropriate person.

• **Expect the unexpected.** You can’t completely control press conferences so be prepared for the unexpected question.

• **Prepare press packs for attendees to take away.** The typical contents of a press pack might include a press release, biographies of the speakers and photos – ideally on disk or USB stick.

Once you have carried out your due diligence and decided that the press conference is a worthwhile event and a good means of communicating your news, they can be an important element of a communicator’s toolkit.
Other means of communicating with the media

There are other means of communicating and educating the media as well:

• **Providing proactive expert opinion.** One of the key ways of being successful with the media is being proactive and offering up expert opinion. If you have something interesting to say and respond to them quickly, journalists will come back to you again and again. Using statistics and research data also goes down well with journalists.

• **Road shows.** Another means of communicating with journalists is via road shows where you visit journalist offices for a series of roundtables and editorial briefings. A road show might take in a variety of cities and countries. In such cases, it’s crucial that activities are customised for each country. For example, find out the language that the journalists are most comfortable communicating in and provide a spokesperson accordingly. Supporting materials, such as invitations, press backgrounders and press releases, will also need to be translated accordingly.

• **Journalist workshops.** Journalist workshops as capacity building tools are another option. For example, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) held a number of successful workshops on water issues for journalists across Asia from 2003 to 2005. These can be very useful capacity-building events as well as an opportunity to educate journalists on the MRC and develop closer relationships.


“Scientists at the Mekong River Commission (MRC), an intergovernmental body, also warn that if the sea level continues to rise at its projected rate of around one metre by the end of the century, nearly 40% of the delta will be wiped out.”

*Navin Singh Khadka. BBC World Service Vietnam, 20 October 2015*
CHECKLIST - ORGANISING JOURNALIST FIELDTRIPS

- Check everything in advance so all travel, accommodation and logistics go smoothly.
- Don't plan every minute of journalists' time. While it's important to have a structure for the trip, give journalists some flexibility and spare time to explore their own possible angles, speak to specific people etc.
- Communicate. Keep journalists in the know at all times. Share with them up to date schedules and what they can expect to see on different parts of the field trip.
- Don't cram too much in. Give journalists some downtime during the trips. They will probably need time to write their story up, submit blogs etc.
- Brief all spokespeople in advance. Make sure all people involved in the field trips, including local community leaders, are briefed well in advance and know exactly what to expect. Ideally you should develop briefing notes on the journalists and their publications in advance.

- **Journalist field trips.** Journalist field trips to a project site are an excellent means of educating journalists on the activities the MRC and NMCs are conducting and how they are helping local communities.
Dealing with the Media: Do’s and Don’ts

In the previous section, we talked a lot about the media and tips on dealing with them. This section brings some of these strands together to provide an overview of top tips when dealing with the media.

The stakes are high when you talk to the media. Get it right, and your messages will reach your target audience. Get it wrong, and you can be the catalyst for negative publicity and future difficult relationships with journalists.

Follow these suggestions, however, and you can ensure a long-term and beneficial relationship with many journalists.

Picking up on many of the points in Chapter 4, this section will provide an overview of ‘Do’s and ‘Don’ts’ when dealing with the media. It’s probably worth doing a quick review of this section before you have any media contact.

- Do’s when dealing with the media
- Don’ts when dealing with the media
- The current media landscape
Dealing with the Media: Do’s and Don’ts

Don’ts when dealing with the media

• Don’t get angry. Journalists can sometimes be aggressive in their questioning. Don’t take it personally and don’t get angry. Keep calm at all times.

Do’s when dealing with the media

• Make sure it’s newsworthy. Make sure your news passes the ‘so what?’ test. If not, think again.

• Know the media. You need to think like a journalist, see stories in the way that journalists see stories, and speak in a language that journalists can use in their stories. You also need to put yourself in the place of the publication’s typical reader. What are they interested in?

• Know your messages in advance and stay on them. It’s vital that you prepare and memorise your messages in advance. There’s surprisingly little room for information in a typical news item or broadcast interview and it’s vital that you get your messages up front or you’ll miss out on the chance altogether. Also don’t be afraid to repeat them although in different words, of course. Saying exactly the same thing again and again might open you up to ridicule.

• Be concise and keep things simple. This is repeating what has been said previously but it’s vital.

• Have some readymade facts at hand. We talked about the importance of proof points in the messaging section so make sure you have those vital facts at your fingertips. ‘Let me give you an example’ is often an effective bridge within a media interview and enables you to focus on those proof points. Proof points also give you credibility and take you away from general information.

• Try a story as well. People’s interest tends to increase when listening to stories.

• Respect deadlines. Getting back to journalists prior to deadline and providing them with the necessary information is key to a long and trustworthy relationship.

• Be accessible. Don’t hide away from journalists and make sure you return telephone calls. That doesn’t mean that you have to immediately answer their questions though.
• **Don’t let interruptions unsettle you.** Some journalists might try and unsettle their interviewee by asking many questions very quickly. Take a deep breath, keep cool and answer the questions at your own speed. ‘Let me go through your questions one at a time. Firstly.’

• **Don’t go ‘off the record’.** This is a risky strategy and can only apply to journalists that you have very strong relationships with. As a rule, only tell journalists things that you would be happy to read in the newspaper the next day.

• **Don’t say ‘no comment’.** No comment makes you sound defensive and as if you have something to hide. Try and provide a reason why you can’t answer the question. ‘I can’t answer that question at present because.’

• **Don’t use jargon or acronyms.** Don’t assume the reporter will know what you mean.

• **Don’t worry about saying ‘I don’t know’.** That’s fine. It’s better than pretending you know and saying something incorrect.

• **Don’t lie or even exaggerate.** You will in the end be caught.

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**What To Say When Dealing With The Media**

“Let me give you an example of how climate change can affect ordinary people. Due to sea levels rising in Viet Nam by 5 mm a year, salt water destroyed more than 6,000 hectares of rice fields last year.” **Storytelling, statistics, showing the impact on real people being proactive & taking control of interview.**

“I know your readers are particularly interested in rural areas, so let me give you an example from North East Cambodia.” **An example, thinking of the reader, customising your example for the publication.**

“The Asian Development Bank and World Bank have failed to tackle many of the irrigation problems facing South East Asia today.” **Criticising third parties.**

“I’ve really no comment to make on the rumours surrounding the Don Sahong dam.” **No comment, gives the impression you’re avoiding the question, explain why you can’t talk about it. Look to take control, ‘what I can tell you is...’**
There are few international publications that have a truly global outreach. Such publications might include the Financial Times, the Economist, the Wall Street Journal and to a certain extent the New York Times. Similarly on the broadcast side, candidates would include BBC World, CNN, Al Jazeera and French 24, a Paris-based international news channel.

In terms of pan-Asian publications that are read across Asia, again many of the international publications fall into this category with their Asian editions, such as the Asian Wall Street Journal, the Asian edition of the Financial Times and the International New York Times. There is also the South China Morning Post. Pan-Asian broadcast media include Channel News Asia. Voice of America and Radio Free Asia are also very active in the region with both English and local language shows.

**The current media landscape**

The final part of this section provides an overview of the current media landscape in Asia. While this is not an exhaustive media list, it provides a brief overview of the different types of publications that the MRC and NMCs are dealing with.

- Don't let inaccurate statements go unchallenged. If you think the journalist has said something incorrect, let him or her know and make sure they are corrected.

- Don't feel like you have to fill in for awkward silences. Silences or pauses are fine. Don’t feel like you have to talk just for the sake of it.

- Don't criticise third parties. This rarely reflects well on you – especially when the third party in question isn’t there to defend him or herself. There might be a few exceptions but not many.

- Avoid the Either/Or Yes/No questions. Some journalists may ask you to answer questions within these narrow parameters. Many issues are too complex to be answered like this, so say so.
Dealing with the Media: Do’s and Don’t’s

There are a number of international newswires many of whom have correspondents in South East Asia and, in particular in Bangkok, Phnom Penh and Ho Chi Minh City. Examples include Dow Jones, Bloomberg, Thompson Reuters, and Agence France-Press (AFP). There are a number of more local South East Asian newswires as well, such as the Lao News Agency, the Xinhua News Agency (China), Agence Kampuchea Presse (AKP) from Cambodia, and the Vietnam News Agency. There are also more social and development-focused news agencies, such as Inter Press Service (IPS) and IRIN that focuses on humanitarian stories and is an independent, not for profit media organisation.

Pan-Asian news & country websites.

There are a number of pan-Asian news sites as well. For example, Asiamag.com; Asia Source; Asia Times and the Diplomat, an online news magazine that covers politics, society and culture in the Asia-Pacific region. In addition, there are also member country-internet news sites, such as VietNamNet.

Member country broadcast media.

The broadcast media in member countries is also a key target. In Thailand, for example, 80% of Thais rely on television as their primary information source with broadcast media including Thai TV3.

Member country radio media.

The member country media is also important – from national radio stations to community stations. Community radio stations have proliferated in Thailand, for example, as an alternative to government-controlled solutions. In Lao PDR, there is the state-run Lao National Radio; in Thailand, there is Radio Thailand; in Cambodia, the National Radio of Cambodia and private radio stations such as Beehive Radio that is known for tackling sensitive issues; and in Viet Nam, Voice of Vietnam.
Dealing with the Media: Do’s and Don’ts

Another key target will be English language publications in MRC member countries. While they don’t have the large circulations of the local language publications, they can be highly influential, being read by government members, international organisations and NGOs. In Thailand, there is the Bangkok Post and the Nation; in Lao PDR, there is the Vientiane Times, a daily newspaper; and in Cambodia and Viet Nam, the Phnom Penh Post, Khmer Times, Vietnam Daily News and Saigon Times respectively.

Each member country also has a variety of local language publications with considerable influence. Mass circulation publications in Thailand include Thai Rath, which has a strong rural readership; the Daily News; Khao Sod that is strong on environmental issues and human rights; and Matichon and Krungthep Turakij that tend to be more popular with intellectuals. In Cambodia, there are the two main Khmer-language newspapers, Rasmei Kampuchea and Koh Santepheap. There is also Thanh Nien in Viet Nam and Vientiane Mai in Lao PDR.

The communications team at the MRC will be able to provide more detail on these publications and others.
Every organisation is vulnerable to crises and they normally happen when you least expect them. It also takes years to build an organisation’s reputation but only hours or days to have it completely dismantled.

However, thorough planning can at least ensure that you handle a crisis – no matter how significant – on your terms. Prior to looking at the key stages of putting together an effective crisis management programme, it’s important to understand the main rules that guide crisis communications. These rules will influence all other activities.

- The top rules for any crisis communications programme
- The different stages - conducting a vulnerabilities audit
- Identifying the crisis communications team
- Identifying & training spokespeople
- Giving spokespeople the necessary tools
- Documenting processes & procedures
- Drawing up a response – holding statements
- External notification systems – making the holding statement public
- Moving on from the holding statement – crisis message development
- Intelligence gathering
- The debrief and lessons learned
The top rules for any crisis communications programme

- **Act quickly and be proactive.** In all crises, it’s crucial that the MRC is proactive and is seen to take control of events. Don’t let other third parties set the agenda and put you on the defensive and in reactive mode.

- **Don’t sit on information.** The worst reaction to a crisis is the constant ‘drip feed’ of information as pressure builds. Make sure that you get all the information – even the negative information – into the public domain as quickly as possible. And don’t say ‘No comment’. For many outsiders, this amounts to an admission of guilt.

- **Never lie.** If an organisation is seen to be hiding something or not being honest, crises can spiral out of control.

- **It can’t happen to us.** Don’t ever fall into the trap of thinking that crises can’t happen to us and it’s simply not worth the investment. Crises can happen to any organisation and at any time and can have a devastating impact on their reputation and ability to operate.

- **Don’t let the lawyers make the decisions.** While they will obviously provide important legal advice, if they lead all communications (often avoiding saying anything externally), it can make the crisis worse.

- **Don’t just focus on the media!** While the media are a key audience and can be instrumental in driving crises, it’s also important to brief other important stakeholders, such as development partners and national line agencies during a crisis. To this end, it’s helpful if they can hear from the MRC direct rather than just through the media. That way, you have much more control over your message.

- **Plan & plan again!** Finally, no crisis has to be completely unforeseen. If you put in place a crisis response plan based on worst-case scenarios, it will allow the MRC to immediately take control and ensure that all processes and scenarios are rehearsed.

**YOU CAN ACTUALLY EMERGE STRONGER FROM A CRISIS.**
The different stages - conducting a vulnerabilities audit

If you want to prepare for crises properly, it’s essential that you take an honest look at your organisation and your vulnerabilities.

To this end, you need to gather senior management and the communications team and brainstorm all possible crises that could occur within the MRC – no matter how unlikely. Such crises could include everything from the CEO being arrested for alleged financial embezzlement to mass floods that weren’t predicted by the MRC, or a member country unilaterally deciding to leave the organisation. In some cases, of course, you’ll know that a potential crisis is about to occur.

If you do the rehearsal and groundwork now at a time of calm, you’ll be better prepared when or if a crisis actually occurs when you’ll be tested to the limit.
Identifying the crisis communications team

It’s crucial that you put together a crisis communications team that will coordinate activities during a crisis. Ideally, this will include the CEO, other members of senior management, members of the communications team, and a legal expert (whether in-house or external although an in-house legal practitioner would be preferable). Such a team should ideally reflect a host of knowledge across the MRC.

Ideally, you should also give people responsibilities in communicating with different audiences. For example, there should be a designated person to brief NMCs, donors, NGOs etc.

Once you have identified your crisis communications team, you should ensure that you have all their contact details from emails to mobile phone numbers to landlines so they can be contacted 24/7.

Identifying & training spokespeople

Now you have your crisis communications team, it’s necessary to train them.

Amidst any crisis, it’s vital that you have authorised spokespeople to speak on behalf of the MRC and it’s also vital that they are sufficiently trained. They must be able to communicate clearly and calmly and work well under pressure.

Matching the right people for the right assignment here is critical. Of course, there will be times where the crisis is sufficiently severe where only the CEO can speak on behalf of the MRC. In many other cases, however, there are other people who can speak and they should all be identified and trained in advance.

What type of training will they require? Much of their skills will be learned via media training sessions although speaking to the media – or other audiences for that matter – when a crisis occurs can be very different with the pressure much higher, the questions more aggressive, and the need to make snap decisions vital. You are not so much proactively promoting your organisation but instead preserving your organisation. Training will therefore require a number of role-plays and practice at dealing with all types of media.
THE SPOKESPERSON – KEY ATTRIBUTES

- Comfortable with the media and in front of the camera.
- Skilled in identifying key points and conveying messages.
- Of a suitable position within the organisation to command authority and establish credibility.
- Knowledgeable.
- Responsive.
- Sincere and honest.

Giving spokespeople the necessary tools

In addition to this, it’s important that – as well as being trained – spokespeople have other useful tools. This might include:

- A Q&As document that will have been developed well in advance and that will cover all crisis eventualities. It will also help the spokespeople in handling tough questions.
- The MRC’s messaging handbook – even in a crisis you should still keep in mind your key messages. MRC should continue to update a messaging handbook. Typical contents for such a handbook are referenced in Chapter 3.
- A full documented, process-driven crisis communications plan (see next section).

Documenting processes & procedures

Of course, no matter how well trained and no matter how many tools the MRC and NMC spokespeople have at their disposal, they cannot be truly effective unless the processes and procedures are put in place internally so that they are completely clear on when to act and in what way when a crisis occurs. These processes and procedures will act as the core of the crisis communications plan.

When a crisis occurs, for example, it’s essential that proper notification systems be put in place. Anyone within the MRC could learn about the crisis initially and they should have a point person to contact. That person will then need to engage the core crisis communications team and notify the selected and trained spokespeople.

To this end, the MRC will need to rely on internal notification communications platforms - from SMS text messages to emails to pagers. In such cases, multiple communications vehicles should be considered as some people read texts more than emails etc. and vice versa.
Similarly, throughout the crisis, all staff should be briefed on an ongoing basis and given strict instructions on where to refer calls – should they receive them from journalists.

All the elements in the rest of this section will also be included in your processes and procedures.

**Drawing up a response – holding statements**

Once a crisis has been identified, the crisis communications team must get together immediately to review their options. While it’s important to be proactive when facing a crisis, it’s equally important not to rush to judgment until all the relevant information is available and full messages are agreed.

For this reason, a holding statement is a useful tool to be implemented after a crisis has broken. Such holding statements can often be prepared in advance to meet a wide variety of potential scenarios (identified in the vulnerabilities audit). For the holding statement, you must insert as many facts as you know without over reaching or speculating.

The crisis communications team should then regularly review such holding statements to determine if they require revision or whether other more detailed statements are required. Such holding statements should be issued as soon as possible to illustrate that the MRC is on top of the situation.

**External notification systems – making the holding statement public**

Once you have a holding statement, it’s important to distribute this both externally and internally as quickly as possible. It’s much better if your key stakeholders learn about a crisis from the MRC rather than third parties. To this end, thought needs to be given as to how to contact such people – whether it be via personal emails, social media etc.

As previously mentioned, it’s also important that your key stakeholders hear from you direct. Therefore, holding statements – customised if necessary – should be sent to NMCs, donors and NGOs etc. This will demonstrate that the MRC is on top of the situation and is being proactive. In disseminating information and communicating with stakeholders, a log should also be established to record all telephone calls and emails. This will help with follow-up and also assist in the post-crisis debrief.
Moving on from the holding statement – crisis message development

You should never rely on the holding statement for too long. While the holding statement is intentionally vague in the course that you gather information, if you continue to rely on it rather than providing concrete specifics, negativity towards the organisation may increase. It also may give the damaging impression that you are trying to hide something.

For this reason, once the appropriate questions have been asked and information gathered, the communications team must develop crisis-specific messages. Again, as with all message development, keep it simple and focus on no more than three messages. You might also need to customise the messages for specific audiences. In such cases, it’s always best to acknowledge any mistakes up front. This will help re-establish the MRC’s credibility with key audiences.

Once developed, it’s then time to deploy one’s external notification systems again to ensure that all stakeholders are fully briefed. At this stage, it’s important to put as much information into the public domain as possible, as well as indicate how the MRC intends to deal with the crisis. A solution-based focus is crucial here. ‘We realise that things have gone wrong and this is what we intend to do about it.’

Intelligence gathering

As a crisis evolves, it’s crucial that effective intelligence gathering procedures are put in place. Knowing what is being said about you on social media, for example, can actually help you pre-empt crises. Similarly, the monitoring of feedback from all stakeholders during a crisis can help you adapt strategy and tactics accordingly.

From regular Google searches to a variety of paid monitoring services, there are a number of potential intelligence gathering options available.

WHAT TO DO IN A CRISIS? AN EXAMPLE

Hypothetical Scenario: North East Thailand has experienced serious flooding without any advance warning from the MRC’s flood forecasting data. A lot of villagers are very unhappy and some Thai-based NGOs and the Thai media are leveling the blame at the MRC.
The Art of Crisis Communications

* A hypothetical example.

01 The already identified crisis communications team meets immediately to gather as much information as possible and determine what announcements can be made to the media and other stakeholders. Representatives from the flood forecasting team and ‘on the ground’ MRC personnel involved in local projects in these villages are also included in the meetings.

02 A holding statement is agreed and sent to the media and other stakeholders. The statement expresses sympathy for the local residents, says that the MRC is working with other partner agencies and the Thai government to do whatever it can to help, and is looking into its flood forecasting data and processes to determine whether they can be improved for the future. MRC spokespeople are made available to speak with both the national media and local media to explain the situation as well as provide advice to local villages on what flood mitigation measures can be put in place. As well as being sent to the media, the statements are sent to all other stakeholders.

03 Following further investigation, it seems that incorrect data has come out of the Chiang Khan and Nongkhai hydrological stations. The MRC sends out a follow-up statement to explain this and the steps that are being taken to ensure that this doesn’t happen again. The MRC also announces the setting up of a working group with local villages in affected communities. A number of Op-Eds are also placed in key Thai media and by-lined by the MRC. Critical articles in the media are also addressed via letters to the editor in subsequent publications.

04 As the days go by, the negative criticism towards the MRC starts to abate with many people knowing more about the MRC as a result of the crisis. The MRC’s ability to acknowledge mistakes early and set about proactively addressing the issues also counts in their favour.

05 A debrief session takes place with the crisis communications team to discuss lessons learned and how things can be improved in the future.
The debrief and lessons learned

Finally as the crisis starts to abate, it’s a good idea for the crisis communications team to sit down and conduct a full debrief. Questions that should be addressed would include:

- What was done right?
- What could be done better?
- Were there any gaps in the communications template?
- Was the crisis identified as part of the vulnerabilities audit?
- If not, do we need to conduct another one to ensure all scenarios are covered?
- Is more training required?
- How can we improve our systems in the future?
Communications products remain at the heart of the standard public information work that the MRC carries out. Whether print, digital, broadcast or audio and whether they cover the documenting of workshops, the dissemination of news or the technical simplification of a report, the majority of communications products the MRC produces fall under this category.

Yet, are there set rules that the MRC should adhere to in developing these products? While this handbook doesn’t cover the corporate guidelines and design requirements for such products, it does provide some general advice on standard communications products followed by a few points on specific ones.

- General advice on communications products
- Newsletters & other print materials
- E-newsletters
- Report writing
- Photography
- Videography
- Shooting video
- User manuals/training kits
- Other communications products
- Other dissemination channels
General advice on communications products

Communications products are subject to the rules of all good communications. In order to stand out from the crowd and the wide variety of other products competing for people’s attention, they must consist of strong, simple and up to three key messages. Below are some other suggestions to ensure you have compelling communications products.

**Focus on the educational.** Try and be as educational and informative as possible. Try not to be overly promotional in regard to the MRC. Readers will appreciate the MRC based on the quality of the articles, research and success stories.

**Make sure all communications products are consistent.** It’s important that people realise that all communications are MRC-related and such materials must not look like they come from different organisations. Many organisations, for example, have specific corporate guidelines that provide advice on logo placement, font, use of visuals etc. The communications department can provide more details on this.

**Promotional materials must also be easy to read and understand.** It’s less important to bring in the latest designer or video producer (although a strong design obviously helps). What is most important is that you focus on the right information and messages. Cut the jargon and keep it simple and to the point.

**Focus on the results.** All communications products should focus more on the results and benefits to stakeholders of MRC activities and less on the processes and internal meetings. They must mean something to people’s everyday lives.

**Keep the materials up to date.** It’s important that people feel that they are reading the latest documents. For print materials, this might necessitate the need to cut down on heavy print runs and print updated PDF files as when needed. Also ensure that materials, including videos, can be easily downloaded from the MRC website. It’s important that such communications products are also developed in a timely fashion.
Keep them regular. It’s important that once you commit to a communications product (other than a one-off product), you make sure that such products are disseminated at regular intervals. There’s nothing worse than a newsletter that only goes out sporadically when people have the time to produce it.

Go local. Consider translated versions of your most important communications materials into the 4 riparian languages or subtitles for videos. Having them just in English will limit their exposure. The MRC’s Fisheries magazine, ‘Catch & Culture’, for example, is printed in a number of different languages. Make sure though that the key messages are accurately translated. A native speaker should review all relevant material.

Encourage colleagues and outside parties to contribute to communications products. Try to tap into expertise and knowledge across the MRC and NMCs. You could also invite NGOs, donors, government officials, and local community leaders to contribute as well.

Make sure you have the right structure and a common thread. Too many communications products are cluttered with a random collection of stories, text and statistics. Make sure that there’s a common thread and a number of themes throughout the product under which stories can hang.

Include the latest research and case studies. Communications products are often about promoting the latest research and success stories at the MRC so make sure you do this.

Make sure that the language is as accessible as possible. Avoid too much technical jargon and sentences that are too long.

Always give the option for the reader to find out more and include contact details. This could include a strong appendix or references. Many communications products also have some kind of call to action and the inclusion of an expert’s contact details.
Standard print materials are probably the most common form of communications at the MRC today. They might include brochures, leaflets, infographics and posters as well as regular newsletters, such as ‘Catch & Culture’. There are also other more institutional documents, such as the MRC Annual Report.

All the suggestions in previous section apply to such materials, in particular the need to focus on clear messaging, keeping these messages simple, and ensuring that they are compelling. Some other suggestions:

- It’s important to have a strong summary at the beginning of the newsletter or brochure and common thread throughout to attract the reader’s interest. In a newsletter, for example, this might be an introduction from the editor. The box below provides a very clear overview of the Vol.21, No.1 issue of ‘Catch & Culture’.

- It’s important to have a clear table of contents and an obvious structure to the print materials. That way, the reader can focus in on what is of greatest interest to them. In a newsletter, news stories should be in the same part of the publication, features in another section etc.

CHECK LIST - PRINT MATERIAL

- Be educational
- Be consistent
- Focus on results
- Keep it simple and relevant
- Create a strong summary
- Make the language accessible
- Encourage third party collaboration
- Proofread
Think of your audience. All the MRC’s print materials will have different audiences and subsequently require different tones of language. The MRC Annual Report, for example, is likely to have more institutional language than ‘Catch & Culture’.

Proofread. Quality is vital for the credibility of print materials so make sure there are no grammatical mistakes or typos.

Keep the text short. This is particularly important for infographics and posters. Be as selective as you can in terms of what should be included.

Inform, don’t overly promote. Make sure that there remains a strong educational element to all the print communications products.

“This edition of Catch & Culture looks at Cham Muslim fishing communities on the Bassac River, declines in catches of some large and medium-sized species in the Tonle Sap River and the last temporary breeding station for an endangered carp on the mainstream of the Mekong in northeast Thailand. It also examines recent developments with aquaculture in the Mekong Delta in Viet Nam, illegal brush-park fisheries in Cambodia and how gender training has transformed lives in a Lao fishing village.”
E-newsletters

In addition to print materials, communications products also come in digital format, with e-newsletters chief among them. They might include a monthly update on MRC news or the latest updates from a specific programme. One recent e-newsletter, for example, is called ‘Transboundary Dialogue’ (see: http://www.mrcmekong.org/news-and-events/newsletters/mrc-transboundary-dialogue-issue1/).

Whereas print newsletters can come in electronic PDF format and hard copies, e-newsletters are distributed solely online.

Below are some suggestions on how to create compelling e-newsletter copy.

- **Develop a good overview of your e-newsletter** so subscribers know what they are getting...’A weekly snapshot of...’

- **Look for a compelling email subject line to encourage subscribers to open the email.** Focus on snappy news hooks and develop headers as if writing a news headline. Focus on actions, statistics and local stories rather than process-oriented activities.

- **Pick newsworthy topics.** Focus on topics that are in the news at present and are likely to be of more interest to readers.

- **Make sure that your copy is unique.** Don’t recycle previously published text.

- **Keep design and copy to a minimum.** Avoid the newsletter being too cluttered and go for a clean and easy design. You don’t want the design to take over.

- **But make the format easy for the reader.** Whether it is through adding subheads, using bullet points or bolding certain sections, make the newsletter as reader friendly as possible.
• **Make it easy for people to unsubscribe.** If people would rather not receive it, they need to have an easy option to request this.

• **Get the right email newsletter service provider.** There are a host of providers out there with companies, such as Mailchimp, Aweber and Constant Contact leading the way.

**Report writing**

The MRC generates a regular series of reports - something that is a crucial element of their activities. Below are some general tips on report writing.

• **Get it out there quickly!** Firstly, before going into more detail on structuring and writing reports, it’s important that reports should be published quickly in the public domain. Data has much more impact when fresh and up-to-date.

• **The importance of the executive summary.** A concise and compelling executive summary is crucial and will to a certain extent determine who reads the full report. Such a summary should be concise, be in easy to understand language, and come with a number of specific angles and sound bites.

• **Tell a story.** As has been mentioned previously, storytelling is an excellent means of capturing the reader’s imagination. Just as a story has an introduction, middle and an end, try to incorporate the same structure in reports.

• **Use clear language.** As mentioned throughout this handbook, keep the language clear and easy to understand – the language of everyday speech. This can even be achieved when covering the most technical of information as long as technical terms are used in their proper context.

• **Clear language is also particularly important in the executive summary.** A good way of testing yourself when writing is asking yourself if you would use this type of language when speaking to a colleague. Avoid jargon.

• **Headings & headlines.** Headings and headlines serve an important role in breaking up the text, giving the report a logical structure and attracting the reader’s interest. Headings must be sharp and informative and can often be worded like a newspaper headline. Stick to a single idea and message and don’t make them overlong. Also avoid including unknown acronyms in headlines.
• **Break up paragraphs.** Similar to headings and headlines, it’s also important not to have huge chunks of text. Readers find this very intimidating! Try to avoid more than 50 words per paragraph.

• **And sentences.** Try not to have sentences with more than 25 words. Shorter sentences are better.

• **Use verbs in the active rather than passive.** In a sentence written in the active voice, the subject of sentence performs the action. In a sentence written in the passive voice the subject receives the action. **Try and keep the active voice. It tends to have greater impact.**

• **Utilise quotes.** Quotes can be very useful in reinforcing points. Interesting quotes can also be drawn out of the text and put in stand-alone boxes.

• **Avoid needless words that add no value.** When you are writing, keep an eye out for words that offer no intrinsic value to the sentence. Take the word ‘very’. If you take it out, does it change the meaning of the sentence?

• **Work on the first sentence of every paragraph.** The first sentence is key and normally ensures that the paragraph takes care of itself. Make sure it’s clear, punchy and adheres to all the rules in this section.
• **Write in a sequential and structured way.** Don’t jump back and forth between the subjects. Ensure that the reader knows where the report is going and what will be covered and when. The introduction, contents and executive summary will play an important role here.

• **Use success stories or personal stories wherever possible.** In Chapter 4, the handbook discussed the documenting of success stories. These can be very effective in reports, often being presented in stand-alone boxes. They can also break up the text and will enable the MRC to share programmes that have directly benefitted people and organisations.

• **Proofread and proofread again.** It’s difficult to overestimate how important it is to avoid spelling errors, incorrect names, bad grammar etc. It can affect the credibility of what you are writing. Double-check names and make sure other people have a chance to proofread the text as well. Don’t be afraid to use the communications team.

• **Make sure you attribute sources.** Make it clear how you found certain information. The references section will be a very important element of the report for further reading. Many people also like to see plenty of references, demonstrating that you are drawing on a variety of different people and organisations for information.

• **Avoid clichés and make sure you are culture-neutral.** Avoid over-used clichés as well as sayings that are only applicable and understandable in certain cultures. ‘He hit a home run’; for example, is unlikely to be understood in Southeast Asia.

• **Make sure that all research papers have an ISSN number.** This helps for electronic archiving and cataloguing as well as facilitating access for librarians and researchers.

• **Ensure that there is a uniform approach.** While each report doesn’t have to look the same, it’s important that there is a uniform approach to report writing – both in the report’s ‘look and feel’ – and in the actual content and use of English.

*This is particularly important with the MRC because it operates across different countries and involves staff of different nationalities and backgrounds. With this in mind, MRC staff are asked to refer to the ‘Style Guide for MRC Publications’, published in November 2007. The guide covers everything from Writing English to References and Citations, Tables & Charts, Names of Places, and Guidelines for Presentations.*
Photography

Photography is an excellent means of communicating a story or message as part of a broader communications programme and should be considered an important tool.

Furthermore, as opposed to video, high quality photography can be generated from virtually anyone, if carried out correctly, and can strengthen and support other communications activities.

It’s important to stress, however, that the MRC doesn’t encourage amateur photographers to post. Professional photographers should carry out official work. Amateur photography, however, could be considered as supplementary. Below is some advice on taking good photography.

- **Keep your camera with you at all times.** Photographic opportunities in the field often come at the most unexpected times. It’s a good idea to always have your camera available.

- **Don’t be afraid to experiment.** What do you have to lose with a digital camera and the number of photos you take? Try shots from different angles and in different light.
• **The rule of thirds.** If there’s one single rule you should apply to your photography (or video), it’s the rule of thirds. It essentially avoids putting your subject in the middle of the shot. The rule of thirds involves mentally dividing up your image using 2 horizontal lines and 2 vertical lines. You then position the important elements in your scene along those lines or at the points where they meet. The idea behind the rule of thirds is that an ‘off centre composition’ is more pleasing to the eye and looks more natural than one where the subject is placed right in the middle of the frame. See image below.

![Image of The rule of thirds](image)

• **Always take photos in full resolution and quality.** With digital cameras, there’s no excuse for compromising on the quality and you might regret it later.

• **Natural light is best.** Early morning or late in the day when the sun is low is best. Shoot with the sun behind you to avoid shadows.

• **Use a tripod.** It helps with the camera’s stability.

• **Explore your camera settings.** Find out about the potential of your camera. Read the manual and use multiple settings to explore. In a word, experiment! The same goes for trying different angles and positions.

• **Learn about photo editing.** The best photographers use technology to enhance their products. Don’t be afraid to do the same.

• **Make sure you can transfer photos easily to laptops.** A card reader is the best option here.
Videography

Another important communications product is videography and the use of video clips. While MRC staff are not encouraged to produce such clips themselves, it’s important to understand that they can be used for educational and promotional work and thought should be given to potential story lines.

In terms of what subjects might be suitable, video clips could be used to show off a project, explain how to do something, bring case studies to life, or demonstrate industry expertise. In such cases, it’s important to keep in mind potential stories that you think would convert well onto video and then put your case to the communications team.

There are three main steps in producing a video: pre-production, production and post-production.

• The **pre-production phase** is where the planning takes place before filming begins and sets the overall vision for the project. This includes determining location, cast and budget as well as story boarding the video and developing a possible script.

• The **production phase** will capture all the scenes and information that has been agreed upon during the pre-production process. This stage will also cover areas, such as lighting requirements, framing and composition. It might also be decided to take B-roll footage that is supplementary to the main video.

• The **post-production stage** begins after all the footage has been captured. At this time, graphics and music can be added as well as subtitles, depending on the market the video is going out to. This is also the opportunity to edit the video and make it as coherent and as compelling as possible.

**In terms of distribution, there are a number of ways in which the video can then be used. This might include:**

1. On **social media sites**, such as YouTube, Vine, Facebook and Vimeo.
2. On the **MRC website** or other **website portals**.
3. As part of **PPT presentations** or as introductions at workshops or conferences.
4. As part of **educational materials** and **user manuals**.
5. As **stand-alone film presentations** and at the opening to workshops.
6. As part of **community outreach programmes** – recording debate at local community meetings, for example, and then playing it back.
Another use of video could be video diaries or video letter exchanges that document people’s lives (where videos are exchanged with people rather than letters). These could be shared:

1. Internally within the MRC.
2. Externally with international broadcast organisations.

**Shooting video**

As mentioned previously, for professional videos and documentaries to be submitted to TV channels, you will need to defer to the experts with specialist equipment, production and post-editing skills. Similarly, the MRC communications team will tend to look to professionals for the development of MRC-branded videos and will keep control of output.

At the local level, however, there may be opportunities for amateur video footage to be developed as well as training up members of the local community in video usage. Such video could also be conducted via hand-held video cameras or even a tablet (for example, an iPad or smart phone).

- **Keep it simple!** Just as in messaging, don’t over-complicate things. In videos, it is the narrative and story that is most important. Keep that top of mind throughout and avoid being too ‘over-creative’ at the expense of this. Simple shots are often the most effective and a simple script will be easier to shoot and generally easier for the audience to understand.

- **Plan ahead.** It’s important to have a good idea as to the direction your video will take before shooting it. It will enable you to visualise the story as a whole. Developing a storyboard (a series of scenes) or a rough voiceover is a good means of doing this. Keep in mind how you can focus on the MRC’s unique capabilities, such as modelling, flood forecasting and water quality analysis.

- **Brief your presenters/interview subjects.** It’s a good idea to make sure your presenters or interviewees know what is expected of them. This will minimise time on the day. For the interviewee, give them a heads-up on the questions you will be asking so they can give some thought to the answers.

- **The Rule of Thirds.** As mentioned in the photography section, place your items of visual interest near the intersection of the grid (two horizontal lines and two vertical lines splitting the grid into nine sections).
• **Think about background.** It’s often more visually compelling to have an interesting background rather than a blank white wall. In such cases, have the speaker near the camera and positioned in such a way to make best use of the background.

• **Lighting.** Don’t combine natural and artificial light. Use one or the other. Always opt for extra lighting when shooting indoors – even if it’s just through household lights. Use a reflector to balance the light.

• **Give some thought to B-roll footage.** B-roll footage is any video footage that isn’t of your primary subject. It might include some external shots of the Mekong for example. Whatever B-roll footage you think you’ll need, figure this out as early as possible so you are not left with good interviews but a lack of background footage. If you’re looking for some potentially expensive aerial shots, there is stock B-roll footage you can purchase.

• **Using a tripod.** Using easily available mobile tripods can make a huge difference to the quality of your video. The hand isn’t as steady as you might think. When you start filming, also stand still. Don’t move and don’t zoom!

• **Give people headroom!** When interviewing someone, make sure that there is sufficient space above his or her heads.

• **Hold shots.** Make sure to hold shots for long enough that they will look good once edited. For a still shot, for example, make sure that you hold for a minimum of 10 seconds.

• **Good audio quality is vital.** Without good audio quality, the video is often redundant. Therefore avoid background noise if at all possible. Also, if you have a separate microphone, make sure that it’s as close to the interview subject as possible. Remember to also turn off non-essential equipment that might make an annoying background noise – air conditioning, for example. One final thing – it’s always worth testing the video and playing it back to make sure the audio is working.

• **And tips for shooting video on an i-phone.** Avoid shooting video while holding your phone vertically. This will result in black bars down the side of your video that cannot be fixed via cropping.
User manuals/training kits

Other communications products include manuals and training kits that can be used by local communities or even internally within the MRC to communicate research findings or provide practical advice on different activities. Often these are ‘How to’ documents.

One such example is the MRC Manual on the Flood Preparedness Programme. Such manuals should be written in a clear concise style, be easy to use as reference documents, and should be translated into local languages.

The MRC Environment Programme, for example, produced a training kit published in 5 languages. It includes a glossary, case studies from the Lower Mekong Basin and course modules on environmental development, environmental impact assessment tools etc.

Other suggestions on writing user manuals/ training kits:

- **Always think like the user.** Put yourself in the user’s position and ask yourself their level of expertise and what they would need to know.

- **Write an outline** to ensure that all subject areas are covered.

- **Use the active voice.** This makes it easier to understand where the subject and verb in the sentence are clear.

- **Write clear instructions and organise a clear chapter/module sequence.** The reader must always understand where they have been, what they have learned, and what they are moving onto next. Transitions are very important here. The end of each chapter should also have a summary of key learnings.

Other communications products

Here are some other communications tools that might be considered:

- Another possible communication product could be animation that can help illustrate water management processes. This could also be part of a local outreach programme. These could then be packaged into videos, hosted on the MRC website, disseminated by social media etc.
• **Posters** are also an effective communications tool – from academic posters presented at conferences and workshops through to posters that can encourage behavioural change and are part of local outreach programmes. In all cases, posters need to be well structured, easy to read and include a number of clear messages.

### POSSIBLE VIRTUAL VIDEO/ANIMATION SUBJECTS

- Flooding & Flood Mitigation
- Navigating the Mekong
- Irrigation
- Countering Saltwater Intrusion
- Hydropower Developments

### Other dissemination channels

As well as the media, there are also a number of other dissemination channels that should be considered for communicating information. These include:

- **The MRC Website.** The MRC main official website is the gateway for the general public to obtain information on the MRC and showcases everything the MRC does. The MRC website contains both technical information and organisational achievements with official documents and simplified communication materials.

Make sure that the really important information is up front before going into additional detail – like a press release, for example.

Write in a very simple and concise way. Avoid long paragraphs. Visitors will want to avoid reading large chunks of text on the screen.

Really important information is up front.

Write in a very simple and concise way.

Together these communication products and an effective distribution strategy can play a crucial role in disseminating MRC messages.
Be very clear about your audience. The audience will vary, for example, from visitors to the general website to visitors to technical portals.

Think about sub headings and bullets. This can break up the text into manageable chunks as well as acting as signposts for the reader.

Make sure there are internal links so that people can look elsewhere for additional content.

- **Website Portals.** Website portals also act as an important knowledge hub – an area of the website where users can go to source further information on the MRC and specific information areas. Current portal examples include the MRC ‘Data Portal’ (http://portal.mrcmekong.org/index) and MekongInfo (http://www.mekonginfo.org/) sites.

- **Visitor programmes.** Arranging for stakeholders to visit some of the key sites relevant to MRC projects is another important communications dissemination technique. There might also be briefings by MRC experts on specific subjects.

- **Lecture series.** A series of lecture by key MRC technical personnel is also something to consider. This could consist of possible collaboration with local universities and research institutes.

- **Communities of practice.** Communities of practice are informal bodies – either internal or external – that share research findings, discuss implementation and share other areas of knowledge. Such communities could be based around practice areas, such as an Environment Network, Fisheries Network, Governance Network etc.

- **Workshops.** Workshops, where research results, for example, are disseminated and discussed, are also a useful communications tool for dissemination.

- **Engaging External Bodies.** While all the communications platforms described in this handbook are applicable for this, consideration should also go into engaging other bodies to distribute reports and information – for example local government offices, local libraries, universities, think tanks and NGO networks.
MRC personnel speak regularly at MRC and external meetings, such as the Mekong Fisheries Symposium, the Annual Mekong Flood Forum and other annual meetings, such as Council and Joint Committee meetings.

Yet, how effective is the MRC at maximising its presence at such events? This section of the communications handbook will examine how presentation skills can be improved.

Speaking to large groups tends to be the greatest fear of adults – ahead of heights, insects and flying. However, if you follow some of the suggestions below, you can improve your presentation skills and might even enjoy yourself!

- Structuring presentations/speeches
- Other communications tips
- The use of language
- The importance of body language and voice
- Using PowerPoint
- Handling Q&As
- The role of the facilitator
If called upon to present at an event, there are a number of activities you can go through in order to maximise your presentational effectiveness – in particular by focusing on the presentation structure.

Preparation and a good structure is crucial. Many of the best natural presenters appear relaxed and spontaneous precisely because of the amount of effort they have put in beforehand.

**How does one prepare?** This could be through brainstorming, discussing with colleagues and drawing together the basic information, ideas and messages that you want to be part of your presentation. The end result should be a well-structured presentation that includes the following:

### Structuring your presentation

**1. The Start**
- Who, what and why.
- Why my topic is of interest.
- Establishing one’s authority and credibility.
- Grab the audience’s attention and use statistics.

**2. The Middle Stage**
- Transitions.
- Internal summaries.

**3. The Conclusion**
- Warn them.
- Make your last words count.
- Summarise.
- Refer back to your opening.
Audiences make their first impressions quickly and will decide in the first few sentences whether they want to listen to you. You have just a few seconds to make a positive impact and a good opening impression so make sure you have a good introduction and then rehearse it. You might want to consider memorising it as well.

Your introduction (which should last no more than three minutes) should have three basic goals: to gain the attention of the audience; to create a relationship with your audience; and to give them reasons to listen to you. Some pointers as to how this can be achieved:

- **Answer the following questions in the introduction:** Who you are, what you are going to tell them, why it is important, and why you are the best person to talk to the audience about it.

- **Demonstrate that your topic is of interest to your audience.** All audiences start off thinking: So what? or What’s in it for me? Therefore, in answering the questions above, it’s particularly important to demonstrate how your presentation will link to your audience’s own experiences. How will you benefit? What problems will the information I give you solve?

- **Establish your authority and credibility.** Some detail on your experience and position would be useful as well. You shouldn’t necessary show off here but you do need to tell the audience why you have the authority to be speaking to them.

- **Grab the audience’s attention.** A quote perhaps or a provocative question can be a useful tool here. A rhetorical question is also very effective in engaging the audience straightaway. For example, ‘Imagine having to walk for five hours every day to collect water. How would that make you feel?’ or ‘Imagine if your house had been destroyed by floods three times in the past five years?’

- **Use Statistics.** An interesting fact is always a good means of starting a presentation. ‘Did you know that....?’

- **Relate your presentation to a previous one.** This can also be very helpful, setting a general context for your presentation and telling the audience how your presentation fits in.
Now that you have captured everyone’s attention and included a strong introduction, you need to keep the momentum going.

2. The Middle Section

The body of the presentation is where you will seek to convey your messages and make the audience care about them enough to achieve your desired outcomes. Transitions play a crucial role in keeping up the flow and momentum of your presentation.

The importance of transitions: A presentation should flow smoothly and seamlessly. In order to achieve this, transitions are vital. Transitions help move from one point to another. They also act as internal summaries within a presentation so you know where you are at, where you have been, and where you are going. Finally, they provide a break to the average listener (who is unlikely to be able to concentrate for more than between 5 and 10 minutes on a particular subject). Here are some typical transitions.

- **Other typical transitions** include ‘Now let’s take a look at.‘, and ‘the next point is.’

- **Moving towards the conclusion**. Another key transition is from the main body of the presentation to the conclusion. Tactics here might include: ‘In conclusion’, ‘so what can we learn from this?’, or ‘let me leave you with one final point.’

- **Using internal summaries as transitions**. As mentioned, transitions can also be internal summaries. An internal summary should succinctly state what you just covered and announce where you are in the presentation.

3. The Closing Section

Finally, there is the conclusion. If the introduction is the first impression, the conclusion is your final impression and your last chance to make an impact.
The conclusion plays a key role in determining how the audience will remember you and your messages. It provides closure, tying all the threads together, and providing the audience with a sense of completeness. Briefly summarise your main points, and make a rousing call to action (if that is the purpose of the presentation). Some tips on your conclusion:

- **Warn them!** Audiences like to know in advance that you are planning on finishing. Tell them when you are getting close to your conclusion. Don’t just stop suddenly and unexpectedly.

- **Make your last words count.** Your last words should ideally form an emotional connection with the audience. ‘If you remember just one thing I have said today’ or ‘I have one final thought that I want to leave you with.’ This could form the basis of a call to action – the best opportunity to change the audience’s behaviour or attitudes once they leave the room.

- **Refer back to the opening.** This gives a sense of completeness to your presentation. ‘So, as I said at the outset…’ You could also re-establish the connection of the topic to a larger context.

- **Summarise the main ideas of the presentation.** It’s often very useful to summarise what you have said before.

### Other communications tips

As well as the structure of the presentation, there are a number of other tips to consider that will help you get your point across:

- **Remember your messages.** Of course, content is still key. You have to have something interesting and worthwhile to say. Remember your messages and make sure there aren’t too many!
• **Don’t cram in too much information.** In English, most people speak on average around 150 words per minute. Select the most important information and leave detailed, technical information for the handouts.

• **Practice!** Allow sufficient time for practice. A good presentation must be tried and tested several times to become smooth and natural in delivery.

• **Show your passion.** Be passionate about your topics and let your enthusiasm shine through. That’s the best way of engaging your audience.

• **Don’t go on for too long.** It’s better to have the audience wanting more rather than being relieved that you have finished. Don’t ramble and go on too long if you can avoid it.

• **Humour.** Humour is a useful attribute to use in presentations. It lightens the mood and intensity and it’s actually after people laugh that it is often the best time to deliver a serious point. Make sure any joke you make is non-offensive though.

• **Stories.** Storytelling is one of our oldest forms of communications and has an intrinsic reality and credibility. It’s the way that ideas and information have been transferred from person to person for thousands of years. In presentations, they bring topics to life and bring colour to all types of presentations.

### The use of language

The choice of language is also crucial in a presentation. Again some suggestions:

• **Adapt a conversational style.** Try to be as conversational and naturally expressive in your presentation as possible. People tend to warm to the more relaxed style. Have a conversation with your audience.

• **Avoid bureaucratic words.** Use the most straightforward words to convey meaning.

• **Avoid colloquialisms.** It will obviously depend on the audience but avoid too many colloquialisms specific to a particular culture.

• **Rhetorical questions to hammer home a point.** As already mentioned, rhetorical questions can be very effective in stressing a point. ‘How serious is this situation?’ or ‘What does the MRC intend to do about it?’
• **Keep sentences short.** The more words a sentence has, the more difficult it is to understand. Long sentences tend to include more sub clauses and it is often difficult to keep up. If you find a lot of sentences with more than 20 words, start rewriting your presentation.

• **Use active rather than passive language.** The active voice makes your sentences more forceful and powerful because someone is doing something in them.

The importance of body language and voice

Your body language when making a presentation can have just as much of an effect on an audience as your words. Be conscious of your appearance and the message it sends – and above all, be natural and avoid taking attention away from your message. Watch a videotape of yourself with the sound turned down and you will learn a lot about your body language.

• **Identify distracting habits.** We all have personal mannerisms, such as taking glasses on and off, tapping fingers etc. Get feedback to identify any that you need to address.

• **Use of gestures.** The overall energy of a presentation is enhanced by the use of gestures. Try not to stand rooted to the spot.

• **Posture.** Stand or sit with a relaxed but alert posture. Standing is better while presenting. It focuses attention on you and gives you a better view of the audience.

• **Movement.** Movement adds variety and emphasis and it also takes you away from the podium – a barrier with the audience. Movement can also signal a change in content in the presentation.

• **Maintain eye contact.** Know your material well enough that you can look at as many members of the audience as possible. Eye contact also gives the impression of openness.

• **And never turn your back!** This is a sure sign that you are about to lose your audience.

• **Don’t let the podium act as a barrier** between you and the audience. Clinging to the podium shows nervousness.
• **Avoid hands on hips.** Instead make gestures that enhance your message. For example, if you have three points, count them out on your fingers.

• **Avoid arms folded.** Again this is another barrier between you and the audience and makes you look as if you might be hiding something.

• **Don’t have hands in your pockets.** This takes away the opportunity of gesturing with hands and limits your options.

• **Standing up straight** with weight on both feet is the preferred position for presentations.

• **Gestures.** Make sure you vary your gestures. However, you don’t want to look like a robot and be too wooden.

**AND VOICE....**

• **Warm up your voice.** Do some vocal exercises before you speak.

• **Get rid of the filler phrases** – um, okay, aagh etc. They make no contribution to your presentation.

• **Managing your volume** is also a powerful tool. Anytime you shift the volume, people will pay attention. Make use of this.

• **Use the pause.** The pause is a vital part of the communications process – it leaves time for ideas to sink in. It also clears the way for the importance of what comes next. Don’t be afraid to use it whenever possible.
Using PowerPoint

PowerPoint is probably the greatest public speaking innovation in the past two decades. The downside, however, is that many people feel unable to speak without the safety of a PowerPoint. People have a tendency to forget that they are the presentation not the PowerPoint.

Below are some tips on how to use PowerPoint in your presentations:

• **Do you need it?** Firstly, ask yourself if you really need PowerPoint. PowerPoint should only be used if you think such visual information increases the clarity and the impact of the messages. It should not be used just to make you feel more comfortable presenting.

• **Don’t make your PowerPoint a barrier and don’t read it word for word.** There’s nothing worse than someone reading all the text on his or her PowerPoint. It’s quite simply a waste of everyone’s time and it would be easier for all delegates if they had just been emailed the presentation. Refer to the PowerPoint but only selectively use text from it.

• **Keep slides brief.** Avoid too much information/too many words. Ideally you should have only 3 to 4 bullets per page and often less. While there is text on the screen, the audience will be reading it, not listening to you.

• **Use graphics sparingly and make sure they are relevant.** Visuals should be simple, clear, and with a defined purpose: to support the presenter. They should be large enough to be seen by the whole room.

• **Keep your slides clean and consistent.** Don’t mix and match slides- especially if they have different fonts, colours or design styles. This distracts the audience from the message. Also don’t let logos distract from your message – they should be discreet.

• **Simple fonts.** Use simple typefaces, and no more than 2 fonts. If possible, have a colleague turn the pages so you are free to move around and concentrate.

• **Avoid upper case/capital letters.** People need to be able to read word-shapes as well as the letters. Yet upper case makes every word a rectangle, making it much harder to read.
• **Speak to the audience not the PowerPoint.** Speak to the audience, not the screen. The visuals should support the speaker and not vice versa.

• **Be consistent. Maintain styles and continuity between slides.** Also make sure that all MRC and NMC personnel, who are presenting, work from a similar template.

• **Keep up the pace and keep talking as the slides are changing.** Practice with them. Make sure they look attractive and professional.

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**POWERPOINT SLIDES YOU WANT TO AVOID...**

**Unclear Graphs...**

**Distracting Backgrounds...**

**Text Overload...**

**Poor Font Choice...**
THE RISE OF MIND MAPPING

One way of better structuring your PowerPoint is mind mapping – a diagram that is used to represent different themes and that is linked to a central key word or idea.

Mind mapping is about the ability to analyse and make connections, to use knowledge effectively, to solve problems, and think effectively. There are a number of mind mapping programmes available or you can just use a piece of paper to start mapping things out. The example below shows a mind map based around a person’s business trip abroad.

See http://www.mind-mapping.co.uk for further examples.

Handling Q&As

Following the presentation, there is also likely to be a Questions & Answers (Q&As) session with the audience. Some tips on how to handle these sessions:

- Don’t drop your guard and relax too much just because your presentation is over. You can still leave the podium with a negative impression with the audience if you don’t get the Q&A session right.

- Take your time in answering questions. Too many speakers jump in thinking they know what the question is before the questioner has finished.
They then look rather silly when they hear that was not the question. It’s important to be patient and wait until the full question has been read out.

- **Use names when you can.** You are unlikely to know the names of everyone in the audience but if you do recognise the person, feel free to use their name. It helps put you in control, makes you sound knowledgeable, and the questioner also likes the recognition.

- **Don’t be afraid to compliment the questioner.** ‘That’s an interesting question’ or ‘that’s a good question’ are two examples. Don’t give the impression that all other questions are not good questions though!

- **Treat every question with courtesy.** It’s important that you treat every question with courtesy even if you consider it to be a little basic.

- **Look interested and engaged.** It’s important to look interested – even if you are not answering the question. Make sure you listen to everyone else on the panel.

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**CHECK LIST - HANDLING Q&A SESSIONS**

- Don’t relax
- Take your time in answering questions
- Use names
- Compliment the questioner
- Treat every question with respect
- Look engaged
- Be honest
- Don’t show off
- It’s OK to say ‘I don’t know’
• **Give yourself time before answering questions.** Don’t rush into answers. There’s nothing wrong with a long pause, for example. Repeating the question can also give you the necessary breathing space to develop your answer.

• **Be honest with people.** If you tell someone that you will get back to them with a piece of information, make sure you do.

• **Don’t show off but don’t be afraid to demonstrate your experience.** ‘I have spent over 10 years studying the impact of flood mitigation schemes on the Tonle Sap and I can say without doubt…’ or ‘When I presented the linkages between economic growth and energy consumption in Vientiane to the Minister for Energy’ etc.

• **Don’t be afraid to say ‘I don’t know’.** As mentioned previously, don’t guess any answers or go outside your comfort zone in terms of expertise.

**The role of the facilitator**

One often-overlooked role at conferences is that of the facilitator/moderator who doesn’t always do a presentation but moderates the session and fields questions (there are, of course, facilitators in meetings as well).

This is an important role and brings with it a number of skills including keeping conversations on track and ensuring everyone’s voice is heard. So, what makes a good facilitator?

• **Set the context and be clear.** Be very clear as to the themes you will be covering in the workshop or presentation session and the objectives.

• **Keep discipline.** Make sure speakers don’t go off topic or are too over-long. Ideally, it would be good if you could review speaker presentations in advance and offer comments.

• **Generate a presence and sense of authority.** The moderator needs to have gravitas and you should have everyone’s attention. Without boasting, perhaps give a brief introduction of your experience. ‘I have worked in water resources management for the past 20 years.’

• **Remain independent.** Understand that as the moderator you should come across as independent (even if you don’t agree with what some people may say). Don’t make judgments on other people’s point of view and be balanced.
• **Prepare and anticipate.** Prepare the topics in advance and anticipate the most contentious issues that are likely to come out in the Q&As phase.

• **Learn about the other speakers.** Find out about the other speakers – interesting facts about them, for example. Request biographies that can form part of your introductions to each presentation.

• **Ask questions.** Don’t be afraid to ask questions. Especially if you feel that it is a question that needs to be asked to fill gaps in the discussion.

• **Keep control and keep calm.** Make sure that you take control of events and keep calm and polite at all times. It could be overly hostile questions, interruptions from the audience, a speaker who goes on too long etc. Just explain things calmly and politely and try and provide a constructive route forward. ‘Can I ask for quiet from the audience’, ‘I’m going to have to ask you to wrap up your presentation’, ‘If you could ask your question please in a polite and constructive manner, we can then continue...’ etc.

• **Pick up key themes and issues.** Look for connections between the topics discussed by the speakers. Help the audience join the dots.

• **Give some thought to people in the room.** What are their interests? How can you move the conversation and answers closer to what they would want to hear?

• **Limit questions from one person.** Don’t let one person dominate all the questions. Also ask all questioners to state their name and the organisation they represent.

• **Draw things to a conclusion.** Draw the different strands of discussion together in your final comments. Try to finish things on a high with some action-oriented statements. Also make sure you thank your speakers.
The same fundamentals in communications apply with whomever you are dealing. This chapter includes some additional suggestions on how to deal with specific audiences – namely NGOs, donors and the general public. Again, these are just general observations and will need to be customised based on one’s knowledge of specific audiences.

- Communicating with donors
- Communicating with NGOs
- Communicating with Governments
- Communicating with the public
Communicating with donors

Many people within the MRC spend the majority of their careers dealing with donors so they don’t need to be told that maintaining good relationships with such donors is critical in securing resources and goodwill. The stronger the connection with donors, the more likely they will continue to support the MRC and their programmes.

Donors want to be reassured that the MRC is using its funds effectively and efficiently, encouraging positive changes through the funded programmes, and conducting activities that reflect well on the donor. Below are some tips to strengthen those relationships and secure on-going donor loyalty.

- **Establish a positive relationship from the outset.** This might consist of holding launch meetings, reviewing agreements, establishing clear roles and responsibilities, and managing expectations. It’s essential to find out what the donor wants out of the relationship. Ask questions and learn how often the donor wants to hear from you and in what way. A good start will establish a strong platform for open communications and collaboration moving forward.

- **Setting up a communications protocol.** It’s important to establish a set of rules around communications. This covers what information needs to be shared and with whom. Create a list of personnel within the MRC that will be required to share information and cover specific areas of expertise from technical to financial communications.

These people may have a direct relationship with the donor or go through a single gatekeeper. It depends and will change based on the personalities involved. Logistically, it’s also important to understand how the donor likes their communications – via phone, email, monthly meeting etc. Ideally all this should be incorporated into a set of communications guidelines for each donor that can be circulated to staff.

- **Document activities.** After important meetings or conversations, send a written summary of issues discussed and follow-up actions. This creates a record of the meeting and avoids misunderstandings in the future.

- **Always be responsive!** Respond as quickly as possible to donor requests and manage expectations if the required information will take time to compile. Never compromise on the quality of work to meet unrealistic deadlines.
• **Submit deliverables on time.** Meeting deadlines shows professionalism and reliability. If a deadline can’t be met for whatever reason, alert the relevant person in plenty of time.

• **Document your successes effectively and spread the word.** It’s important to chart and document successes. Not only do they reflect well on you but also the donor. Make sure that you acknowledge the donor and their involvement. With their permission, look to also spread the word whether it be through the media, conference presentations, social media etc. You may well ask the donor to co-author a paper or co-present at an event, for example. This can only strengthen the relationship.

• **Accuracy is critical!** It’s vital that deliverables are clear, well-written and without errors so that they reflect well on your organisation and may be shared with other funders and stakeholders.

• **Admit weaknesses and challenges.** Don’t be afraid to admit challenges and weaknesses in the programme. It’s the sign of an open collaboration. Make sure that you can come up with a planned solution to tackle any challenges. Documenting lessons learned can be incredibly useful.

• **Arrange site visits.** Site visits are an excellent opportunity to show donors where their money is going and the benefits. A well-organised and informative introduction and site visit is an important way to communicate successes and needs. Always plan ahead and have strong and well-briefed spokespeople available to showcase MRC work to visitors, potential donors, and advocates.

• **Make sure you focus on the same messages.** Try and avoid mixed and different messages to the same donor. A messaging handbook should help here.
Communicating with NGOs

NGOs are another key target audience and while a few NGOs might be adversarial, there are many others looking for collaboration and to work with the MRC and NMCs.

- **Establish goals & divisions of responsibilities.** Be clear as to the objectives behind the relationship and what you want to achieve. Set up the parameters and any division of responsibilities. Establish point people for contacts.

- **Engage the NGO early in the process.** NGOs don’t tend to feel appreciated if they are only involved in the latter stages of a project when all the key decisions have been made. Make sure they are involved at the outset and ensure that they have influence.

- **Be aware of the different cultural backgrounds of many NGOs.** Take the different backgrounds of people into consideration and do your research in advance.

- **Keep promises and observe deadlines.** In order to create an environment of trust and collaboration, it’s vital to keep to all deadlines and promises. Manage expectations at all times and if you can’t meet a deadline, let the NGO know well in advance.

- **Consider inviting NGOs to existing events.** While such invitations would have to be handled carefully to ensure there are no disruptions, consideration might be given to the invitation of NGOs to existing MRC meetings and forums.

Communicating with Governments

While the MRC and NMCs are well versed in dealing with governments of member countries (with NMCs obviously part of these governments), below are some further suggestions on communicating with governments:

- **Look to conduct exchange visits** with politicians and provincial governments in the four member countries.

- **Focus on parliamentary committees** specialising in water and water-related resources.
• **Target pan-Asian parliamentary bodies** such as the Asia-Pacific Parliamentarians Conference on Environment and Development (coordinated by South Korea) and the Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development (coordinated by Japan).

• **Take into account the different protocols** and establish regular lines of communication.

• **Utilise the NMCs in taking the lead.** NMCs can play a crucial role in leading these communications.

• **Make sure you have plenty of briefing materials** (translated into the local languages). Simple, 1-page or 2-page policy briefs can be very useful, for example.

• **Invite government members** and parliamentary members to established events.

• **Advocacy** can also take place in partnership with international organisations. The UNDP, for example, has strong links with National Assemblies through its programmes. Other organisations might include the Asian Development Bank, World Bank and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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### Communicating with the public

As part of its ‘public engagement’ theme, the MRC also organises a number of public forums, workshops and national consultations. These activities are governed by the MRC’s ‘Statement on Public Participation’.

Below are some effective ways as an intergovernmental organisation to engage the public:

• **Define your audience.** Make it clear as to what sections of the public you are targeting and customise your messages accordingly. What is their level of knowledge? Are they experts or local communities? What regions are they from? How can we capture their attention?

• **Make it very clear as to why you are engaging certain members of the public.** If it’s a workshop or consultation, for example, make sure that it’s very clear what the topics are.
• **Ensure that there is the ability for two-way dialogue at all times.** For a workshop, for example, invite suggestions on areas to cover.

• **Understand the local context.** Try and understand the local context of the people you are trying to engage with. What are their socio-economic and demographic characteristics? What are their social, economic and environmental challenges?

• **Be transparent and inclusive.** Encourage the participation of all stakeholders who have an interest in or who would be affected by a decision and make sure they are given all the information they need.

• **Show commitment.** Show commitment by giving the forum, workshop or consultation the appropriate priority and resources.

• **Provide different means for people to participate.** Provide as many different channels as possible for people to provide input.

• **Be responsive. Show a willingness to listen.** Those being consulted must perceive that their voices will be taken seriously, and that things can be changed. If they do not perceive this, they will not participate.
Community outreach – or what is often linked to participatory communications or behavioural communications – should be an essential element of the communications toolkit.

- Putting together a community outreach strategy
- Community radio
- Performing arts & mobile theatre
- Posters, photo essays & drawings
- Community events
Reaching Out to Communities

Community outreach – or what is often linked to participatory communications or behavioural communications – should be an essential element of the communications toolkit.

Normally, such activities tend to bypass the media and other third parties and go direct to communities. On many occasions, however, they also take place alongside broader communications programmes. The typical teams that often conduct such campaigns include field workers, communication and media experts in radio, video production and design, and other communications specialists.

In the majority of cases, the goal of such activities is to initiate behavioural change and to empower communities to discover solutions to their development problems and issues. Today is an exciting time to embark on such programmes with the wide variety of communications vehicles now available. 90% of the world’s population, for example, is now covered by a mobile phone signal and 40% have access to the Internet.

While in-depth handbooks are available elsewhere to provide guidance on local outreach programmes and their design, this section of the handbook will provide a brief introductory overview.

DEFINITIONS

**Outreach**: An activity of providing communications activities to populations who might not otherwise have access to those services. An overarching umbrella of activities directly and indirectly reaching out to the agreed target audiences.

**Participatory Communications**: A specific type of communications based on communications and dialogue, which allows the sharing of information, perceptions and opinions among the various stakeholders, thereby facilitating their empowerment and raising awareness.

**Behavioural Communications**: Communications strategies that are designed to change the audience’s attitudes and belief systems.
Putting together a community outreach strategy

Putting together a community outreach strategy is not hugely different from any other communications strategy. Essentially, it consists of the following steps:

**Stage 1: Communications assessment and setting objectives.** At this stage, issues are researched and analysed and an initial plan put in place. Stakeholders must be identified and their communications needs assessed. Based on this, sets of objectives are established.

At this stage, a brainstorm is often a good idea with questions that might be addressed including: What input do you need from stakeholders? What are their ideas and priorities?

What members of the public are you planning to target? In the case of the MRC, there are a multitude of potential stakeholders, such as line agencies of the member countries, civil society groups, river-based organisations and the general public.

**Stage 2: Agreeing audiences & messages.** Once objectives have been set, it’s necessary again to identify the key audiences and messages for the campaign. It’s important here that care and thought goes into the messages to make sure that they are aligned with community values.

**Stage 3: Implementation of communications activities.** Following on from the objectives, an action plan is developed to guide implementation and facilitate the management and monitoring of all relevant activities. Such a plan should cover outputs, activities, timelines and responsibilities. For example, what are the best methods of reaching your target audience? How do they receive information? What are their literacy levels etc.?

**Stage 4: Monitoring & Evaluation.** Finally, there is the monitoring and evaluation. How can you measure the success of such programmes? How can you determine whether there has been behavioural change?

**There are a variety of different communications vehicles for local outreach programmes.** The next section presents some platforms that lend themselves particularly well to local outreach programmes.
Community radio

With mass media not always reaching communities, focused and customised community radio stations can play an important role in outreach campaigns, often reaching significant numbers of people at a relatively low cost.

If the goal of the project, for example, is to increase awareness towards climate change, support villages with their flood mitigation schemes, or increase the need for wetlands protection at a local level, community radio can be an important means of disseminating key messages.

There are many such radio stations throughout South East Asia as well as sometimes more basic methods such as loud speaker broadcasting in a village. So how can the MRC and NMCs tap into this communications vehicle? Activities might include:

• **Training community radio reporters through workshops.** This is an important capacity building activity.

• **Arranging roundtables to enhance networking among stations for community engagement.** This can also be a forum to discuss issues to cover, with the MRC and NMCs suggesting possible topics.

• **Pitching stories to local radio stations with a key focus on why this matters for specific local communities.** There might be a time, for example, where the MRC could provide a complete package to local radio stations that includes interviews, news reports or even a feature that includes a number of interviews.

• **Offering up MRC and NMC spokespeople for interviews.** In particular, division chiefs or specialists in the field might be a good resource here.

• **Providing the necessary toolkits and experts for educational radio programmes.** Educational programmes tend to disseminate knowledge and practical advice on particular issues. Again, the MRC has a wide variety of materials it could provide here.

• **Encouraging radio stations to act as participatory forums** where people can exchange views and knowledge. This could be through live community debates or an on-air call back programme.
• **Providing possible drama programmes or stories that can be made into radio programmes** and which focus on key development messages. Drama, such as radio soap opera or plays, tend to generate significant interest. One could also support music that includes development messages.

• **Creating advertisements/jingles that reinforce/educate a certain behaviour.** These would be similar to public service announcements.

In addition to radio, there are a host of other entertainment-education formats that can be used as part of community outreach programmes.

### Performing arts & mobile theatre

Mobile theatres, community soap operas, puppet shows and video screenings are all great ways of telling stories and conveying key messages that encourage behavioural change.

Plays or soap operas, for example, can also be designed and written where each character reflects a specific group of people, with positive characters associated with the behaviour that the producers want to promote and negative characters representing old practices. One possible scenario, for example, might be the sustainable management of fisheries and practices to be encouraged and discouraged.

Some other suggestions on putting on drama-based activities:

• **Encourage community engagement.** Ensure that in most cases it is the local people shaping the story rather than the shaping coming from the MRC office in Vientiane! With theatre, for example, there might be cases where outside artists visit local communities to put on their plays or that the plays are designed and put on by the local community.

• **Tap into local celebrities.** It’s often a good idea to use a high-profile local person to help convey your messages or someone a little different. You could use a local comedian or a local civic leader.

• **Incorporate local ideas.** Ask local communities what formats they would prefer. What would work for them? Test ideas on them. For example, show them a sample picture. What is the video/story about? What is happening? Is there anything you would change?
• **You don’t need to be too serious!** Education via entertainment is all about engaging your audience. Don’t be too serious and it’s fine to have some humour.

• **Combine different formats.** Entertainment/education formats can also combine different formats, such as music, drama, dance and puppetry. It’s OK to leverage all these.

• **Avoid lecturing.** Try not to lecture people. Make it subtler – in the form of a story perhaps.

• **The power of the storyboard.** The storyboard is incredibly useful in developing structures and sequences for these educational formats. Use small sketches along with text to take you through the plot.

• **Don’t get technical and understand your audience.** It’s very important that you understand your audience and speak in their language. If many are farmers, draw their experiences into the conversation and the same if the key audiences are women.

**PUTTING ON DRAMA-BASED ACTIVITIES**

- Encourage community engagement
- Tap into local celebrities
- Incorporate local ideas
- Use humour
- Ensure participation for all
- Don’t get too technical
- Use storyboarding ideas
- Gain feedback, measure success

• **Do your research.** This is all part of doing your preparation – making sure you use appropriate dress, use the right style of language, and understand local culture.

• **Make sure there is participation for all.** Ensure equal access and meaningful participation from all individuals. Keep in mind language and literacy abilities as well.

• **Measure and gain feedback on the impact of the communications.** This will help shape future outreach communications campaigns. This can also be used when pre-testing a campaign.
Reaching Out to Communities

Posters, photo essays & drawings

Posters, photo essays and drawings can be particularly effective in schools and local communities as a means of getting messages across. You might be encouraging innovative approaches to flood mitigation, for example, or explaining the pros and benefits of hydropower.

On page 119 is an example of a photo essay – photos with caption and which tell a story – from the Asian Development Bank that could be developed within the local community or elsewhere.

In terms of posters and drawings in particular, when developing them or supporting local communities in their development, encourage them to be simple and bold, and focus on just one point at a time. Many of the communications tips already conveyed in this handbook also apply here, such as avoiding technical language and focusing on results rather than processes. Knowing one’s audiences is, of course, also essential. Writing a long essay, for example, would depend on literacy levels among the target audiences.

Also help people identify with the posters, essays and drawings by keeping these consistent with the local context (gender, age, clothes, animals, seasons etc.) so people can relate to them. Storyboards are again very effective here.

It’s also important to pre-test posters, essays and drawings on local communities. What is happening here? Is the message getting across? Are there things you would change? Adapt accordingly.

Children’s books with lots of drawings and pictures are also an excellent means of communicating. Such books could be incorporated into educational curriculums and be used as part of literary programmes.
These communication tools of posters, photo essays and drawings can also be used for participatory communication. You can organise a poster competition, for example, to encourage people in the community to enter their work and get a prize. This type of participatory communication could be very effective to promote key messages at the local community level.

Community events

Using a community event as the main platform for your local outreach programme can often be effective. It’s important to note, however, that it often helps to reach out to people rather than asking them to come to you.

For example, you might consider setting up a booth or table at a popular community event or getting on the agenda of the village monthly meeting. This might be more successful than holding a stand-alone event.

In such forums, video can also be used to record debate and local community meetings and then be played back. This can raise awareness of what is being discussed. Video can also be used to help showcase people’s opinions – people who would feel less comfortable standing up in front of an audience.

The Sermo Dam, built in the 1990s in the Indonesian province of Yogyakarta, still provides local farmers and villagers with a reliable supply of water.

Farming is backbreaking work at the best of times. Whenever water for irrigation is scarce and crop yields drop as a consequence, farming becomes an unrewarding activity and food security can be threatened.

The dam has improved agriculture in the area by providing water to three irrigation systems covering more than 7,000 hectares. This has benefited more than 18,000 families.
Today, social media is prevalent in our personal and professional lives. Businesses and organisations around the world are utilising communications vehicles such as LinkedIn, Twitter, Line and Facebook to get their messages across. Similarly, many of the MRC’s target audiences are looking to social media for their information.

This chapter will take a look at some of the most popular social media vehicles and establish some rough guidelines around the use of them. The chapter, however, won’t outline specific rules relating to the MRC’s use of social media, as that will have to be developed internally by the communications department. In principle, any posts on the MRC’s official website and social media outlets should be screened by the team to maintain coherent messages.
Social media champions

To leverage social media to its maximum potential, it will first be necessary to identify within the MRC a network of ‘social media champions’. Such people will be responsible for tracking social media activities and ensuring that the MRC remains at the centre of the debate as well as contributing directly on behalf of the MRC. Their responsibilities could, for example, include posting updates on Facebook, contributing to blogs, or posting jobs on LinkedIn.

It’s important to stress, however, that creating a social media group of MRC staff can only be beneficial if the communications team centrally coordinates it, with consistent messages being disseminated.

It’s also important to distinguish the use of personal social media by staff and the official MRC social media sites. The MRC should not interfere with the use of personal social media accounts by staff unless they are harmful to the organisation. There must be controls, however, on who can post comments on behalf of the MRC.

That being said, below are some tips for these social media champions on how they conduct their activities and the essential elements of a social media campaign.

• **Have clear goals.** Be clear as to what you want to achieve through a social media campaign. Use the same stages that one would use for developing a communications strategy or make sure that it is supporting an existing campaign.

• **Quality rather than quantity.** Don’t feel that you have to bombard social media platforms all the time. If it means picking one social media vehicle over another, so be it.

• **Have regular updates.** It’s still important to have regular updates though. If you don’t post for months, your followers will fall away.

• **Make sure you reply to all comments.** The people who reply want engagement and it’s up to you to provide that. That way you can create a dynamic interaction with your followers.

• **Ask your followers.** Social media gives you the opportunity to conduct real-time surveys. Don’t be afraid to ask your followers the kind of information they would like to see. This can be achieved through the posting of questions or even providing a set of multi-choice answers that they can react to.
• **Make use of all media.** Don’t just stick to text in your updates. Make use of all media from videos to images to web links.

• **Make it clear when you are putting forward a personal viewpoint or speaking on behalf of the MRC.** There is definitely the potential for possible confusion here. As a rule, all official MRC pages, such as LinkedIn and Twitter, should be official. If you are making a personal view, you should make that clear as well.

• **Make sure that you don’t post anything publicly on social media that could be detrimental to the MRC’s image.** If in doubt, ask the communications team.

• **Be aware of any copyright regulations.** When you a quote a third party, make sure that you make the source clear.

• **Always be polite and courteous at all times.** Avoid getting into any arguments if you disagree with certain comments. Be calm and polite at all times.

The next part of this section will look at some of the most popular social media platforms.

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LinkedIn

As a business-focused social networking site, LinkedIn provides a variety of communications options for the MRC.

While the MRC already has a LinkedIn page ([https://www.linkedin.com/company/ mekong-river-commission-secretariat](https://www.linkedin.com/company/mekong-river-commission-secretariat)), there are a number of ways that it can be improved and used to maximum effect.

• **Create a strong organisational profile.** A strong profile helps you stand out from the crowd. Make sure you include detailed information about what the MRC does and its key messages on this page. Also keep your main page fresh with compelling images. It’s also important to add specific search engine optimisation (SEO) terms on the profile page (Mekong, water resources, IWRM etc.) so that people can find you on the Internet and through searches.

• **Showcase pages.** For particular specialisms, projects or initiatives, the MRC might consider a showcase page as well. Each of the showcase pages can have unique messaging and can elevate the MRC’s profile.
• **Create a group.** Look into creating a branded group for interested stakeholders to facilitate discussions about the Mekong. The MRC can lead these discussions and use the forum to introduce new policies, reports etc. It’s important here, however, not to use the group just to promote the MRC. It should be a group that fosters open and dynamic discussion. In its role as facilitator, it’s also important for the MRC to be proactive in managing this.

• **Interact in other groups.** Try and join other groups that are relevant to the MRC’s expertise. Once you join such groups, you then have the ability to contribute by posting discussions topics and commenting on other threads. In this way you can highlight the MRC’s knowledge on a topic and even direct followers to your LinkedIn page.

• **Post job opportunities.** LinkedIn is an excellent forum for posting job opportunities and highlighting the MRC as an interesting place to work.

• **Page Analytics.** Page analytics can also be very useful for working out what is and what’s not working on LinkedIn. Analytics can be used to test frequency, topics and formats.

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**Facebook**

Facebook is another platform to promote the MRC ([https://www.facebook.com/mrcmekong](https://www.facebook.com/mrcmekong)) and one that is being used at present.

**Below are some further suggestions on keeping up a strong Facebook profile.**

• **Have a clear goal and strategy.** As with any communications campaign, it’s always important to be clear about what you want to get out of Facebook. What messages do you want to convey and what types of audiences do you want to attract to your page?

• **Promote your Facebook page.** Make sure that you promote the page throughout the organisation and with your target audiences. Put the details in your business cards, email headers, website etc. The same goes for LinkedIn and Twitter.

• **Update regularly.** This is vital – either once a day or at least 3-4 times a week. If you stop updating, people will stop visiting the site very quickly.
• **Make sure that you create a 'human voice' for the organisation.** Make sure that the style of posts is real and likeable. Avoid being too technocratic in the use of language and avoid jargon.

• **Encourage comments and feedback.** Try and ensure that the MRC page is an interactive forum and if people do respond or comment, make sure you reply to them as soon as possible. Your readers must feel an active sense of engagement.

• **Make good use of pictures and videos.** Making the page as visually compelling through a variety of different communications tools will attract more visitors.

• **Highlight events.** Every month, 400 million people on Facebook use the events button to attend specific events. Make sure the MRC uses it to its potential on Facebook. Such events might include conferences, seminars or the latest press conference.

• **Think of other tools.** There are other interactive tools that you might consider as part of your Facebook page. For example, surveys or competitions. They can form a key element of other communications campaigns.

• **Share information from other sources.** In order to be a really valuable information source, the Facebook page should not just be about the MRC but promote other organisations’ research and projects as well.

• **Consider analytics.** As your page attracts more and more readers, consider analytics tools to find out where they are going. Facebook and Google both offer one such option here.

See [https://www.facebook.com/help/336893449723054](https://www.facebook.com/help/336893449723054). There are many other web analytics platforms to select from as well.

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**Twitter**

While the MRC currently has a Twitter page ([https://twitter.com/mrcmekong/status/374721827161243648](https://twitter.com/mrcmekong/status/374721827161243648)), this has not been used recently. Such a page has the potential to be a valuable communications tool – for the dissemination of flood forecasting data, for example, as well as news items.

Many international organisations, such as the World Health Organisation and the International Fund for Agricultural Development are today prolific users of Twitter.
Some suggestions on how the MRC can maximise its Twitter feed.

• **Create the perfect tweet.** You only have 140 characters to grab people’s attention. Sometimes an intriguing quote can be a useful tool or a PR-focused headline. Always leave your audience wanting more.

• **Make sure MRC tweets are regular.** It’s a good idea to post at least one tweet a day or at least 3 times a week so that the MRC’s followers come to know the organisation as one worth paying attention to and one that is posting valuable content.

• **Don’t be afraid to repeat tweets.** Many people only see recent tweets in their timeline. Don’t be afraid to repeat tweets (or rephrase them in a different way).

• **Make good use of pictures.** Tweets that feature pictures (via Instagram, for example) tend to encourage higher engagement. Always consider whether a picture can help illustrate or strengthen your point.

• **To lead you must learn to follow.** Choosing people and organisations to follow will be critical to the success of the MRC Twitter account. The best way to find people to follow (who will hopefully follow you) is to search for tweets that use topic hashtags that are relevant to the MRC.

• **Promote the MRC Twitter account.** Always look to promote the MRC Twitter account in whatever way possible – from email footers to business cards to the end of PPT presentations.

• **If you continue a conversation, take it offline.** While it’s OK for the first few tweets that go back and forth to be seen publically, after this it’s advisable to return to phone, email etc. People don’t need to be privy to your private conversations.

**Promoting a press release through Twitter**

• **Make the most of @ and # (hashtag).** The '@' sign when used on a tweet effectively notifies a person or an organisation that you are talking about them. It's often a good means of strengthening relationships and promoting the MRC's presence. Similarly, you can put the '#' sign (which is called a hashtag) in front of key words to make them more easily searchable and initiate discussions.

“Twitter is the perfect platform to talk about smallholder farmers and rural development issues, topics often overlooked by mainstream media. We are still reaching our primary audience (policymakers), who are conversant with this type of media, but we’re also reaching out to a new group of people, who do not know very much about these issues and who we’d never have reached with traditional media.” – **The International Fund for Agricultural Development**

• **Link to other sources.** Twitter (just like Facebook and LinkedIn) is an excellent means of linking and promoting content that was generated elsewhere. The MRC's latest press release or presentation, for example, can be promoted through Twitter.

• **Leverage other content.** You don't always have to post original content yourself. Through sharing information and using the favourite and retweet buttons, the MRC can become an important facilitator and disseminator of existing information.

• **Don’t just broadcast news.** Twitter is all about making connections and telling stories. Don’t just use it as a newsfeed.

• **Consider more than one Twitter account.** Often organisations have an official organisational account and a personal one from the CEO. The head of UNDP, for example, tweets up to 12 times a day.
THINKING CREATIVELY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

On World Toilet Day, the World Health Organisation asked followers to send in pictures of their toilets. In the words of the WHO, this fostered an understanding of “what not having a toilet meant.”

After the G8 Summit, IFAD held a virtual interview with its president, Kanayo Nwanze on Twitter. “The interaction with our Twitter audience added a new dimension and they asked the best, hardest and least politically correct questions,” IFAD said.

Blogs

Blogs are another important social media communications tool and – if written well – tend to fulfil the roles of an online diary, discussion board and news forum all in one.

A blog can contain personal or project information as well as facts or opinions on any topic, and will normally encourage two-way communications through the ability for readers to post comments. Creating a blog is also an excellent way to showcase a particular project or campaign and can be a great way to get people involved.

Typical blog subjects of relevance to the MRC might include climate change, fisheries or flood mitigation.

Some guidelines to blog writing:

- **Keep the narrative and general points simple** and always focus on the key messages.

- **Make it personal and tell your story.** This will make it stand out from the crowd. The best blogs are the ones that are passionate, come from the heart, and are about things that matter to you. Avoid dry reporting of a consultation workshop, for example!

- **Don’t be afraid to be a little controversial.** The fact is that you’ll never ever please everyone. Don’t be controversial just for the sake of it though.
POSSIBLE MRC BLOG TOPICS

• ‘The dangers of soil erosion in the Mekong Delta.’
• ‘The need for a new narrative on the pros and cons of hydropower development for the Mekong.’
• ‘The need for an integrated approach to basin planning.’
• ‘Flood mitigation must start at the local level.’

• Keep in mind a call to action. Always ask yourselves what you want your readers to do as a result of reading your blog.

• Make sure you update the blog regularly and encourage people to participate. If it’s not regular, people will forget about it.

• Once you have built up an audience on the blog, do some research to find out what they are interested in. Some of this can be gauged from the comments section. Another useful tool is to ask your readers questions.

• Brainstorm regularly with colleagues. It’s important to keep the ideas and angles coming.

• Keep in mind how an interactive blog can support your other social media vehicles and the other way round. Promote your blog on Twitter or ask people to follow you on Facebook at the end of your blog, for example.

There are also numerous online chat rooms and networking websites. If you aren’t already participating in one, see if there are any relevant to the MRC and try to maintain a presence on them. You never know who will be part of the chat room and you could be making contact with some of your target audiences. Remember to be professional at all times.
Determining which platform to use

**Facebook**
- Used for both personal and professional use.
- By far and away the most popular.
- Most evenly distributed demographics of any platform.
- Strong for brand awareness.

**LinkedIn**
- Targeted at the professional community.
- Good forum for networking & recruitment.
- Popular forum for senior decision-makers, policy makers, academics.

**Twitter**
- Used for both personal and professional use.
- Strong forum for relationship building and tracking issues.
- Enables interaction with key stakeholders.
- Aligns well with other social media platforms and campaigns.
- Very effective in reaching audiences who don’t use traditional media.

**Instagram**
- Younger demographic. Most prominent among under 30’s.
- Best platform for posting compelling visual content and video.
Summary

It is hoped that this handbook has provided a practical, 'how to' tool for the MRC and NMCs on how to communicate with their key audiences.

While many of this handbook’s sections could justify a book in their own right, this general overview is designed to give MRC and NMC staff more confidence in their communications with the ultimate goal being an increased profile for the MRC. Training to reinforce some of the issues raised in this handbook is also recommended.

At a time where there are more voices and opinions in the public domain than ever and at a time where the MRC is continuing to promote its role, vision, and missions; we believe that this handbook will form a vital element of the Mekong River Commission’s communications now and into the future.