

SUMERNET "RESEARCH 4 ALL" PODCAST SERIES
EPISODE 10 - How can researchers work together with media: My Le

Full transcript

[00:00:25 - 00:00:32]

Rajesh: Good morning, My Le. Welcome to this edition of the podcast for SUMERNET Research 4 ALL. For all, can you tell us a little bit about yourself, My Le?

[00:00:33 - 00:00:49]

My Le: Good morning, Rajesh. My name is My Le. I'm an independent journalist based in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. So my articles mainly focus on natural conservation, climate change and scientific discovery in Vietnam and around the world.

[00:00:50 - 00:01:15]

Rajesh: Thank you, My Le. It's wonderful to have you here with us for this edition of the podcast. We invited you especially because you were a part of the media grants work of SUMERNET. You were one of the journalists who joined us last year and you produced a story. Can you tell us a little bit about the story that you produced as part of the media grants? Why did you choose that story? What was your interest or what was the thing that attracted you most in that topic?

[00:01:16 - 00:01:57]

My Le: I must say that it's an honor to be part of this initiative to get to follow the researchers and learn about their work. For the grant, I followed a research group of SUMERNET 4 ALL projects and we went to U Minh Thuong wetlands in Kien Giang province in Vietnam. From the very beginning, I chose to follow this research just because I read their proposal and recognize that they would go to U Minh Thuong. For Saigonese like me, U Minh Thuong is a legendary place. There are lots of stories about their monstrous fishes, snakes and dangerous water and trees.

[00:01:58 - 00:03:02]

My Le: Of course, I didn't go there because of the monsters, but I have the feeling that this place is wild and rich in biodiversity and that's why I wanted to follow the researcher. For my article, I wrote about the potential challenges for the people in U Minh Thuong in the coming years because of climate change and their water management. So for me, I think the most valuable lesson that I learned from the partnership is that when we talk about water security, we must first talk about the security in people's minds and like the residents of U Minh Thuong.

When I visited the place, I saw water everywhere and I didn't understand why there should be a shortage of water in the near future. But then, months after months, I followed the researchers. I talked to them, and I gradually understand the importance of their work.

[00:03:03 - 00:03:09]

Rajesh: So My Le, you said you met scientists. Was it the first time in your media experience that you were meeting scientists to do a story?

[00:03:10 - 00:03:28]

My Le: Actually, I'm lucky enough to have a lot of opportunities to work with Vietnamese scientists in different fields, but for this grant, this is the first time that I met Dr. Duong Van Ni and he's one of [the] reputable science researchers in the field of Mekong.

[00:03:29 - 00:03:55]

Rajesh: So in your own experience, you have met with scientists and as you said, sometimes when you go to an area, you have questions. And it seems scientists and researchers who work there are able to give answers, sometimes not often. In this case, in the wetlands, your encounter with the scientists was very useful, you said. What were the key challenges in your view? How do you think Mekong scientists work with media and how can they get better working with media?

[00:03:56 - 00:04:41]

My Le: From my perspective, [for] the scientists who are familiar with media, those scientists will usually collaborate very closely with the media. But for those who don't quite understand the importance of media for their work, they just like shut the door. And I think that's one of the challenges that I faced. In this partnership with the Wetlands Research Group, when we interviewed Dr. Ni, for example, he was very open. He talked a lot, and he explained everything. When we talked to his teammates, some younger researchers, for example, you know the conversation didn't go smoothly.

[00:04:42 - 00:05:20]

My Le: So I think for the Mekong scientists to get better collaboration with the media, first of all, the understanding of the role of media should be spread among the scientists and there should be more conversations. There should be more fieldworks for the two sides to understand each other's roles and from someone from the media side, I think that we need more classes, more training sections so that we can better understand the language of the researchers so that we can communicate about their work easily.

[00:05:21 - 00:05:45]

Rajesh: That's interesting. I picked up on the point that you made that more experienced scientists were easier to talk to than the younger researchers, but I'm also wondering if it's an issue with their own interaction with the media because, you know, when media wants to get an interview, they always talk to the key scientists or the most well-known scientists, they never go to younger researchers. Isn't that true as well, My Le?

[00:05:46 - 00:06:12]

My Le: I have to say yes because there's a common thought that the lead researchers will be the ones who know everything and can answer all the questions. For me, sometimes I would love to follow the younger ones and especially the younger ones who do the fieldwork so if I want to visit the field, I have to contact usually the younger researchers, and that is where the conversation happens.

[00:06:13 - 00:06:50]

Rajesh: Excellent point, because I think that the younger people also have a lot to offer, it's just that they are often ignored by the media but to be fair, media people also have so much pressure of time and resources as they may not have time to sit for a long period in the field. They might just have two questions they won't answer because I have a deadline. So I think it's completely fair that there is always this distinction between, ok, let's go for the elder and more experienced scientist. But I find your point interesting that the people who go to the field have a lot to offer to the media.

[00:06:51 - 00:07:13]

Rajesh: And I think if media do have the time to spend time in the field, then there's a lot more rich information that can be accessed.

So just on that to follow up, how do you think Mekong scientists, whether they're experienced or not, what should they do to get better working with media? If in your view, what would be the lessons you would tell them to get better at?

[00:07:14 - 00:07:50]

My Le: It's necessary that the researchers and the science and the journalists speak the same language. I have experience working with the scientists. But last November, I attended the SUMERNET meeting and sometimes I felt completely lost. When the researchers presented their work, I hadn't thought about the method. But I think for this purpose, there should be some kind of system that helps to simplify the jargon and the language used in scientific papers.

[00:07:51 - 00:08:26]

My Le: And I think researchers, it would be nice if they have patience. They have the time to explain to the journalists, the media person, whenever we don't understand something.

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Earlier, Rajesh, you mentioned about the shortage of time and personnel, I completely agree with you, and I think that one of my advantages of being a freelancer is that I have time. I can control my time and my deadlines so that it's easier for me to go with the scientists to listen to them days after days. But I think it would be different if I'm a full-time journalist.

[00:08:27 - 00:08:48]

My Le: I think this problem is not easily solved, but if we have better plans for like field trips with engaging activities and time to talk and share, I think it will help the partnership or the collaboration get better.

[00:08:49 - 00:09:36]

Rajesh: Thank you, My Le. That was extremely useful insights. Because this was also what we thought when we did the media grants. We thought it would be nice for journalists to not always be under pressure of resources and time, but to have a certain amount of funds and some kind of direction to where they could go and find stories in. We are very happy to know these insights, especially because the time to talk and share is always constrained on both sides for scientists as well as media, and we're trying to get better at it.

Do you think scientists are aware of the value of talking to media? Or do you think they still think of media as a waste of time or an interference in their work? What do you think?

[00:09:37 - 00:10:07]

My Le: Actually, I can't say on behalf of all journalists or researchers. From my experience, I do feel that they know how important it is to put their story or their research work on the Internet to reach the audience. They know that, but like you mentioned earlier, maybe the stress from their work prevents them from spending time with the media.

[00:10:08 - 00:10:32]

My Le: And usually if we have only one day at the field, everything would be in a rush but if we have two or three days, so the awkward silence of the first day will disappear, and usually we can share a lot on the following days.

[00:10:33 - 00:11:32]

Rajesh: Yes, I agree. The more time they spend, the more comfortable and familiar they get with what they want. I think this is also important for the earlier point you made about language, speaking the same language. Scientists need to unpack their jargon into something a little more simple for media and for the general public to understand what they're talking about and why example environmental issues are important which leads me to the critical question of policymakers, because especially in our work in SUMERNET, our science is to produce outputs for policymakers to make them understand what policies are important, what policies need to be changed. And we know that media is an extremely important part of this process, sometimes even helps to bridge the science for us to influence policymakers.

Can you tell us how media can be a better actor in this process? How can you help us get information to policymakers?

[00:11:33 - 00:12:21]

My Le: I think that nowadays, there are a lot of things going on around the world. Therefore, we have a lot of things to put on the Internet and a lot of stories to cover. So I think it's very important that the media person is aware of what topic is the most critical one so they can have their own priority. And communications relating to certain topics should be planned with a detailed agenda in order to influence the policymakers, I think that the message should be repeated again and again, with evidence, with real people and real stories.

[00:12:22 - 00:13:02]

My Le: And I think that the researchers can't do it alone; they need the journalists. They need the media, and so we should think about the collaboration between the media and research as the team, we are on the same boat, and that's why the researchers and the media should do [work] together to bridge science and policy. There should be communication strategies, not just one-time articles, there should be follow-up events or press conference, for example.

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[00:13:03 - 00:13:14]

Rajesh: So just a quick follow up on that. When you say stories, what do you think of the different formats? Do you have a preference for a video or a podcast, or do you think we should produce in a multiplicity of formats?

[00:13:15 - 00:13:50]

My Le: I believe that there should be various formats to present a story because people have different tastes in the platform that they like to have a look at. And especially if we want the story to reach policymakers, who are usually busy, I think we should choose the shortest means of communication like put it into a one-minute video, for example.

[00:13:51 - 00:14:13]

Rajesh: That's interesting. Also, I think in terms of smartphones these days, people find it very easy to access a short video or a short podcast as much as they would reading an article. So that's an important insight as well. We are trying to be able to produce a variety of multimedia, photo stories, writing blogs and videos, so that would be useful for us as well.

[00:14:14 – 00:14:23]

Rajesh: So my last question, as we wrap up, My Le, is what do you have, if anything, to add or if there is anything you think that you would like to emphasize, please go ahead.

[00:14:24 - 00:14:53]

My Le: I'd like to add that I believe that Mekong is a very huge topic and there's a lot of things going on relating to different fields like economics, education, livelihood not only the environment so I think it's important that sometimes we should involve the media, the journalists from other fields to get their voice and to raise their voice about Mekong.

[00:14:54 - 00:15:10]

Rajesh: That's an excellent point because it reemphasizes the critical issue of environment as not just being about environment, but about many other things in society as well. So thank you so much for your time. It was a pleasure to host you in our SUMERNET Research 4 ALL podcasts.

[00:15:11 - 00:15:13]

My Le: Thank you for having me here.