

NVPA at the National Journal Conference for Schools of Public Policy & Affairs

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In mid-January, associate editors of *New Visions for Public Affairs* Jessica Mitchell and Gemma Tierney travelled to the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, VA, to attend the third National Journal Conference for Schools of Public Policy and Affairs, hosted by the *Virginia Policy Review* (VPR). VPR began this annual conference in 2013 in order to bring together graduate student-run public policy journals from across the country to share best practices. In addition to the University of Delaware's New Visions in Public Affairs and VPR, there were representatives from six other journals in attendance: University of Chicago's *Chicago Policy Review* (CPR), *the Cornell Policy Review*, the *Georgetown Public Policy Review* (GPPR), the *Pepperdine Policy Review*, George Washington University's *Policy Perspectives*, American University's *Public Purpose*, and the *William and Mary Policy Review*.

The itinerary consisted of four workshops, four guest speakers, and an Editor-in-Chief panel discussion as the closing event. A theme that emerged in several of the workshops and guest speeches was the value of alternative formats to present policy research. As complements to the traditional academic policy paper, infographics, images, graphic design, multimedia and lists were discussed as methods for innovating and strengthening journals from a holistic viewpoint.

Guest speaker Richard Gard, editor, publisher and president of Missouri Lawyers Media, emphasized the importance of data visualization in his presentation. Gard shared a variety of strategies he had used at his for-profit newspaper to expand readership, which he perceived to be relevant to academic policy journals. One of his key recommendations for appealing to a wide audience was the use of clear and concise data visualization, because, as he noted, "a lot of time, data is the story." Gard explained what he termed the "at-a-glance test," which simply means that an infographic must be comprehensible within the first couple seconds of looking at it in order to be effective.

Gard also advised the journal editors to draw on the resources around them. He explained that other university departments, namely graphic design, marketing and journalism programs, can be great assets in creating a product that reaches and appeals to a wide readership. Gard further noted that the goal of many successful policy journals was to reach not only a wide audience, but also a specific audience: policymakers. His presentation made a strong case for the importance of visual presentation in increasing the likelihood that a policymaker will pause to look at a publication before it passes across her desk. He summed up this emphasis well in one of his final statements, that "the visual is an equal partner in storytelling...[it is] not subordinate to the text."

Like Gard, the final speaker for the conference also came from the for-profit journalism world. Anita Kumar covers the White House for McClatchyDC, which produces stories for about thirty newspapers published across the country. Kumar's presentation shared Gard's focus on creating highly reader-friendly content. Kumar discussed a shift she had noticed in her field towards the use of infographics, videos, lists and other non-traditional presentations formats. Kumar pointed out that lists are not necessarily à la BuzzFeed. News publications can and do publish lists based on the same extensive research that would be the basis of a traditional news article. Like Gard, Kumar highlighted the value of data visualization to transform possibly dry or arcane subject matter into attention-grabbing and reader-friendly articles.

One common recommendation from several of the student-led workshops was the incorporation and utilization of an online presence; not only to inform the public about the journal itself, but also as an alternative means of publishing content. GPPR specifically led a workshop on “Online Presence and Blogging.” As a result of many lessons learned through trial and error, the staff members at Georgetown’s journal were successful in transforming their journal to one that is doubly as dynamic by reaching their target audience in both print and virtual formats. Executive Online Editor Garrett Brinker gave a history of GPPR’s website redesigns over the last several years, showing how they had moved toward cleaner and simpler presentations of content. Additionally, they had begun to head their articles with large-scale images which the presenter believed “instantly translated into some kind of emotional appeal.” While they laud the ease with which articles can be publicized online, they also shared their feedback on how policy issues should be given special consideration in regards to format when publishing them virtually. The online readership can vary greatly, so they recommended focusing on topical articles with a variety of visualization techniques including pull-quotes, videos, and interactive elements.

The Chicago Policy Review also provided graphically-themed presentation entitled, “Policy Journal Innovation: Incorporation Data Visualization and Rapid-Response Teams.” Chicago’s journal is unique in the fact that they exclusively publish online, which gives them in-depth insight into visualizing data in modern ways. One subset of their staff is a designated Data Visualization Team, which comprises a small group of students who are responsible for identifying articles that could benefit from supplemental graphics as well as creating stand-alone infographics that explain a particular policy issue. They further explained that while data visualization may seem daunting to undertake, there are several online platforms that exist to assist journals including Infogram, Infoactive, and Datagrabber. Additionally, they cautioned their peers that while supplementing articles with graphics is essential to today’s reader, it is also important to take care not to inundate readers with too many graphs, charts, or tables.

The third National Journal Conference provided grounds for collective troubleshooting as journal editors from around the country gleaned wisdom from one another’s best practices. Mitchell and Tierney were pleased to have the opportunity to acquire some new ideas for the future of NVPA. The journals represented at the conference comprise a variety of publishing formats, and therefore some of the data visualization



methods that were shared were not applicable to all of the journals. However, Tierney and Mitchell hope that they can apply some of these methods to a future issue of NVPA, either by encouraging or working with an author to incorporate infographics into an article, or by helping to create stand-alone infographics in conjunction with the rest of the editorial board. It was very exciting to learn how other journals had grown as a result of what their staff took away from the conference in previous years. Mitchell and Tierney hope that their time at the conference will be similarly rewarding in terms of bringing new ideas to NVPA.

Photo Credit: Juliana Echeverri, Outreach Coordinator for VPR