

HOW TO BETTER COMMUNICATE COMMON VALUES, FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS

Report of high level expert meeting,
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European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights

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Introduction

This meeting was convened by the Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) in response to the urgent need to more effectively communicate, at every level, the fact that rights and freedoms belong to all. FRA's Director, Michael O'Flaherty, spoke in his opening address of FRA's core aim, which is to support the dignified life of everyone in the European Union through the prism of human rights commitments, and of how effective communication is therefore about sustaining support for those rights, influencing change leaders and raising awareness among rights holders. If those with a mandate to monitor, implement, promote or advocate human rights fail in this central mission, then political and media agendas will be hijacked by others who are determined to dismantle the human rights framework.

There is now widespread understanding that misdirected public opinion has the potential to undermine even the most firmly established institutions and instruments, and that therefore many human rights organisations are paying the price for leaving public attitudes largely unattended.¹ The meeting's participants therefore chose to focus, without exception, on a single, vast target group for improved communication: **the general public**. Communicating with the media is, in general, a means to this end.

One expert astutely observed that the same messages and communications that would sway public opinion would prove equally effective in swaying more traditional advocacy targets such as elected politicians and business leaders: in part because these groups are eager to put themselves on the same wavelengths as their electorates and customers, and in part because their expertise or professional roles do not prevent them from responding to messages, cognitively and emotionally, much like everyone else. (Policy makers and civil servants still require technical data and legal advice in more traditional forms, but the channels to this audience were not considered those most in need of renovation.)

"We hear from the average man and woman: you only care about Roma and migrants – you don't care about us. This is a big challenge."

Anon NGO participant

In order to communicate well with the public, institutions need to communicate unlike institutions. They must acquire qualities of speed, agility, flexibility, imagination and novelty, and experiment boldly with new approaches, especially in the rapidly evolving sphere of social media. To this end, the meeting sought to bring together an unusually wide range of disciplines and professions: journalists from both traditional and new media, satirists, human rights educators, NGO communications experts, visual and infographic designers, marketeers and advertisers, anthropologists, epistemologists, socio-linguists and neuroscientists, as well as experts in political communication, intercultural education, data analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis.

The following report is a distillation of conclusions (not formally adopted) and views, based on two days of presentations and lively debate, and combined with written and recorded contributions subsequently submitted by several experts unable to attend in person.

The meeting was conducted under Chatham House rules, meaning that remarks are cited here without attribution, and none of the many sources or examples of

¹ For further background on the current crisis in public perceptions of human rights and the issues it raises, see the [Concept Note](#) informing the meeting.

implemented strategies suggested in footnotes or textboxes are officially endorsed by FRA; they are intended merely as signposts towards key developments in relevant academic and professional disciplines. These signposts are, however, some of the most useful and practical products of the meeting.

Understanding your audience

There was a shared desire by all present to escape their social and professional “bubbles” and “echo-chambers” and to engage in dialogue with a wider, more local and grassroots audience. It was acknowledged that liberal defenders of human rights can be as much the victims of “group deliberation,” reinforcing one another’s assumptions, as those they oppose.² As experts, both individuals and organisations often suffer from the “curse of knowledge”,³ meaning they wrongly assume others care about their specialist subject (human rights) and have the background information needed to understand and be prompted to action by any given message. Before communicating, it was clear that one must identify the target audience and try to understand that audience’s own daily concerns: to demonstrate **curiosity, not condescension**.⁴

While every country’s political make-up will differ, many US findings are valuable pointers for those working in the field of political communication in Europe.⁵ Several European participants reported on their own national-level research regarding attitudes towards human rights and/or freedoms and equalities. In most cases, researchers had found approximately 40 % of people⁶

Debate regarding the ‘angry white men’ label: It was noted that this easy short-hand was conceptually misleading, since it racializes something that is not primarily to do with race, and genders something that is not primarily to do with gender. Others queried how politically ignored this population has really been, and voiced caution about shifting the focus of professional compassion and empathy (and hence, perhaps, scarce resources) away from the needs of minorities towards majoritarian rights issues that are, in reality, less acute. Others highlighted that it may be more accurate to speak of ‘authoritarian personality traits’, triggered (in nearly all of us, to some extent) by a chaotic and fast-changing world, rather than ‘anger’ per se. See ‘[The rise of American authoritarianism](#)’ on Vox’s website.

who, at present, are neither supportive of human rights nor actively antagonistic, but rather unsure or conflicted: ‘**the persuadables**’. It was generally agreed that this should be the priority audience for promotion of human rights, rather than those staunchly opposed or supportive. One participant made the challenging point that even 2 million views on a rights-related Facebook page does not get a message outside the “bubble” if nearly all those people are already “believers” in the message.

It is efficient for communicators to disaggregate and locate this very diverse audience of ‘persuadables’, demographically and geographically, as far as possible. While several

² See Cass Sunstein’s [work on ‘group deliberation’](#) as a causal explanation for why polarisation has become so geographical in the US, reinforcing and radicalising beliefs.

³ See ‘[Faculty development strategies for overcoming the “cure of knowledge”](#)’ on IEEE.org.

⁴ One participant urged everyone to ask themselves honestly what disdain they might feel about their audience(s) and to address this attitude before anything else. If the ‘persuadables’ have ignored the message of human rights organisations until now, “Have you asked them about their reasons for doing so or are you making untested assumptions about them?”.

⁵ Will Wilkinson: [Tale of Two Moralities, Part One: Regional Inequality and Moral Polarization](#).

⁶ For example, [research by Equally Ours](#).

participants cited work at city level as being tangibly rewarding,⁷ the actual geographic distribution of ‘persuadables’ may indicate that rural town hall debates are even more important sites for local engagement and should be prioritised over their city equivalents. Communicators need to ask themselves how their message can meld into the agendas of relevant cities and city mayors, but also whether it translates to a non-urban context.

As expert data analysts participated in the meeting, there was discussion about the new psychographical political micro-targeting that **Big Data and social media** have made possible.⁸ Ethical and human rights concerns (relating to transparency, privacy, data protection and democratic accountability) about the possible promotion of human rights messages using similar segmentation techniques were discussed.⁹ There were varying assessments of costs versus benefits among participants, and several cautions expressed relating to the practicalities of mining commercial data. Fewer issues arise with the gathering of one’s own data for consensual use. In this context, FRA reported on its **Fundamental Rights Survey**, planned for release in 2019, which will be the largest survey of its kind to map European attitudes towards human rights and which should provide a wealth of relevant demographic data. Knowledge of target audience demographics can then help inform communicators’ choices of message and medium (see below).

Understanding values

There was consensus that protection of human rights in the current climate would be best achieved indirectly, by persuasive promotion of certain common values that provide the ethical underpinning to human rights. As a starting point, this requires large-scale mapping of the moral values currently held by citizens. This has already been completed in Europe by PIRC/EQUINET in its **Valuing Equality** 2014 report,¹⁰ and globally, since the 1980s, by the *World Values Survey Map*.¹¹ The former gives the richest picture, country by country, of variations in national values, with rights-promoting values (of self-transcendence, such as ‘universality’) featuring more or less prominently in proportion to opposing values (of self-enhancement, such as ‘authority’ and ‘ambition’). The *World Values Survey Map* meanwhile demonstrates, longitudinally, the close correlation between the level of self-expressive/individualistic values and the amount of ‘freedom’ (as defined in individualistic human rights terms) enjoyed by various citizenries. National organisations will want to drill down further to understand how values vary within their own countries, and local organisations will want to gauge the values of the groups they work with, if these are not already clear.

⁷ It was noted that the current UN High Commissioner for Human Rights always makes a point of meeting with the mayor of each city he visits for any purpose.

⁸ [“Did Cambridge Analytica influence the Brexit vote and the US election?”](#) and other reports in *The Guardian* newspaper highlighted the role of these techniques in elections. See also *Hacking the Electorate* by Eitan D. Hersh (2015) and [Prototype Politics](#) by Daniel Kreiss (2016).

⁹ Getting in touch with the ‘forgotten’ audience is also, for many NGOs, about reinvigorating and expanding their membership base. In some cases, new technology (e.g. the creation of Lookalike supporter profiles from Facebook data) can assist in this expansion of their like-minded bubble to its fullest circumference.

¹⁰ See *Valuing Equality*, available on the [website of the Public Interest Research Centre](#) and on [Equinet’s website](#).

¹¹ See the [World Values Survey’s website](#).

It is not, however, necessarily a matter of only helping values of justice, equality and liberty to multiply and prosper. Several participants cited the influence of psychologist **Jonathan Haidt** on their work.¹² Haidt presents a framework of six foundations for all our values (care, fairness, loyalty, authority/respect, sanctity/purity, liberty) and argues that populists appeal to all six foundations within an individual's personality, while 'liberals' or 'progressives' tend to focus only on the first two. In order to build a broader base of support for human rights, Haidt would say that we need to appeal more often to the non-liberal values within everyone, via concepts such as duty, honour, obligation and hospitality; "Values that speak, in the deepest sense, about our collective lives together," as one contribution put it.

The above approach to values may be particularly effective when communicating messages that are perceived as running counter to local traditions and culture, rather than when shoring up long-established liberal values in their historical centres. It is an approach that recognises and respects the diversity of Europeans' values, derived from their enormously diverse histories, religions and cultures, so that carefully mixed recipes of 'value messages' will be required for different areas and groups.¹³ It was noted that the production of **multiple messages tailored to suit multiple audiences**, communicated via a range of channels, posed a challenge to the idea of institutions remaining non-partisan: as one participant put it, we "should not be centrist but diversified". The risk, in this case, is of being perceived as partisan by each and every side.

There was not, however, agreement among participants as to whether the goal is to actually shift the balance of societal values or, instead, simply to navigate through existing value maps more successfully. Some felt that the latter was the only realistic aim for human rights advocates, especially coming from their current defensive position, whereas others felt that only a reinvigoration of what are sometimes called 'Enlightenment values' can preserve Europe's human rights system.

A third position was that it is possible to attempt a mixture of both, based on optimism that the values supportive of human rights are already latent within every individual, organisation and society. One participant noted that there has, in recent years, been a shift away from the idea of selling, persuading or teaching equality and human rights principles and towards the idea of stimulating organisations and individuals to more clearly discover and voice the values they already hold.¹⁴

There was determination to build more **spaces for dialogue**, both physical and online, about values and rights. It was noted, in particular, that the safe spaces for freedom of

¹² *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* by Jonathan Haidt (2012). He has also presented his core argument in a number of [TED talks](#). Haidt, it should be noted, sees human rights as a 'story' invented to justify our feelings of revulsion or sympathy in the face of certain situations or actions – just as he sees all religion as narrative evolved to help us design and bind together our societies. His opposition to the reflexive denigration of authority, hierarchy and tradition by those who hold secular, questioning and egalitarian worldviews is analogous to the post-colonial critique of a Universalist human rights philosophy (with autonomy and individualism positioned in opposition to community and divinity).

¹³ One participant was consoled that, although it was "not possible to always maintain tight control on the multitude of messages, it may be possible to keep consistency of the underlying values". This does not, however, allow for an approach where values outside of the typical liberal range are also 'mixed and matched' for different audiences.

¹⁴ The goal of [The Values Lab](#) in Ireland is to embed human rights inside organisations via their internal systems, communications and policies. It is a question of purpose and strategy, with a focus on values. The idea that it is a matter of "bringing to consciousness the deepest of our beliefs" is echoed by George Lakoff [see below – *The All New Don't Think Like an Elephant* (2014), p.xiii].

expression and debate about human rights have been shrinking in school classrooms.¹⁵ The zero tolerance approach to expression of prejudice and intolerance – “shutting down immediately any child who uses the ‘wrong’ language and making them feel silenced” – has been shown to have a counter-productive effect.¹⁶ The importance of both civil society and governmental work on implementing agreed principles in regard to the teaching of shared values and citizenship was emphasised,¹⁷ as **investment in education** of children and young people may be one of the most fruitful ways to promote rights-supporting values in the longer term.

Triggering supportive values

Prioritisation of value-based messages does not mean getting lost in abstractions: values are a background analytical structure for the communicator and do not need to be named explicitly in public communications. Indeed, they cannot be overtly called up or argued into being, but must be ‘triggered’¹⁸ using tools provided by disciplines such as cognitive science, psychology and discourse analysis. In this regard, participants overwhelmingly believed that the mistake of those in the legally-dominated human rights field has been trying to speak to people’s rational minds when the biggest lesson of contemporary psychology and cognitive science is that we are all on automatic pilot far more than we know, driven by **subconscious, emotional and/or instinctive forces** some 98 % of the time. The question then becomes one of how we shift or evoke values by ‘moving’ people emotionally.

The Elephants in the Room

Elephants were an oddly recurring metaphor throughout the meeting’s discussions, drawing from George Lakoff’s influential 2004 book (revised edition, 2014), *Don’t Think of An Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate*. The elephant in this case is the test Lakoff uses to show students that trying to negate an existing frame within its own terms is psychologically futile.

Jonathan Haidt (in *The Righteous Mind* (2012), p.xv) similarly uses the central metaphor of a rider moving an elephant, representing human reason riding human emotion and having delusions about steering. The non-profit agency ‘[Move the Elephant for Inclusiveness](#)’, founded in Denmark in 2013, also sees this metaphor as representing the communications expert who can only coax the mass of the general public with incentives rather than beatings.

Another participant talked about the need to break communication development into digestible chunks of process, asking: “How do you eat the elephant? One bite at a time!”

One written contribution cautioned, however, against the ‘framing’ of communication science since the late 1970s as being solely about exposing humans’ underestimated irrationality. His concern was that “the enthusiasm with which psychologists have promoted sensational findings which attest to our irrationality is corrosive to the public sphere, via a collective loss of faith in reason.” The elevation of feeling over thinking is a problem in so far as

democracy must be based on the “assumption that rational persuasion can occur” and

¹⁵ See [RightsWatch UK’s Preventing Education report](#).

¹⁶ See the [report on zero tolerance](#) by the American Psychological Association.

¹⁷ See the work of the [International Association for Intercultural Education](#) that works to give teachers the skillsets and confidence to talk about these issues with students. Note also the relevance of the European Commission Strategic Framework 2020, which gathers the EU Ministries of Education and has a working group on ‘equity, social cohesion and active citizenship’. One participant cited the example of a [6-page, illustrated children’s version of a UN human rights report produced by Human Rights Watch](#).

¹⁸ Some theorists of cultural transmission speak of ‘attractors’ rather than ‘triggers’ [*Explaining Culture* by Dan Sperber (1996)].

because it is dangerous if our sense of “responsibility for thinking and choosing is lifted”.¹⁹ Another contributor highlighted the fact that the work of Haidt and his followers does not tell us much about how social change occurs: how the content of opinions about specific human rights (e.g. attitudes to homosexuality) have evolved historically even when human psychology has not.²⁰

The answer must be that different triggers have activated different values over time. The search for progressive triggers, through the use of communicative frames, has been led by the American linguist and psychologist **George Lakoff**, whose influence was cited by several practitioners.²¹ Lakoff’s work has spawned the FrameWorks Institute in the USA,²² and the absence of a European branch or duplicate of this Institute was regretted. It was acknowledged that sometimes it takes real creativity and ingenuity to find an alternative frame that will work for a particular human rights issue. One participant reminded others that human rights lawyers have been framing arguments in order to win in court, sometimes in front of juries, for a long time. This has not, however, generally included use of emotional triggers that appeal to ‘non-liberal’ values such as sanctity or loyalty.

One participant urged his fellow communicators not to “quibble over language and labels”, but to think instead of the bigger, deeper message and how to make people feel it. Examples of successful agenda-setting, by promoting stories that show rights and freedoms as broader than ‘political correctness’, were cited.²³ These were contrasted to less successful habits of advocates, such as human rights reports that threaten with penalties for non-compliance, or which merely argue with an anti-rights narrative (such as the depiction of refugees as intruders and burdens). Lakoff’s research proves that responding to a negative frame only reinforces it in the audience’s mind, so it is vital to stop “feeding the beast” (i.e. rights opponents) by reacting to real-time events until and unless one has consciously defined one’s alternative framework (and/or is able to counter

¹⁹ This prevailing “enthusiasm” may be a necessary corrective to the deep bias towards pure rationality in previous human rights communications with the public and media. It is nonetheless important to affirm the importance of persistently restating the rational, factual, evidence-based reasons for human rights in tandem with value-driven and emotive messaging. Also, certain preconditions for successful outcomes from rational persuasion are important, such as the audience’s sense of direct involvement in an issue, and certain types of reason have proved more persuasive than others (e.g. causal vs statistical arguments). For evidence of the effectiveness of rational argument, see *For Argument’s Sake* by Tom Stafford (2015), and *The Enigma of Reason: A New Theory of Human Understanding* (2017) by Hugo Mercier & Dan Sperber. Even George Lakoff, one of the most influential ‘reframers’, states that “Facts are all-important. They are crucial.” (*The All New Don’t Think of an Elephant*, p.154). Participants in this meeting also emphasised the need to engage in the substance of rational policy debate, rather than staying on the safe ground of purely legal critique.

²⁰ Will Wilkinson: [Tale of Two Moralities, Part One: Regional Inequality and Moral Polarization](#).

²¹ See [his website](#) for more information. Note that George Lakoff’s advice about frames may occasionally seem in conflict with the principles espoused by Haidt: for example, if one should never respond within a negative frame, then one should never counter arguments about the economic burden of fulfilling a duty with evidence of its affordability or economic benefits, however this appeal to gain (versus loss) may be precisely the way to talk to those who do not share universalist values as a basis for altruistic, rights-respecting action.

²² See their [website](#). Their practice started looking at the issue of early childhood development and worked out that they had to shift public communications away from values of vulnerability and stress, replacing them with values of prosperity and the avoidance of ‘toxic stress’. This in turn moved the policy debate away from an agenda that blamed parents.

²³ An example was given of how the UK’s Equality and Human Rights Commission had had its report on religious discrimination in the workplace covered positively on the front page of the right-wing tabloid *Daily Mail* because they had fed the editors a particular angle about the rights of Christians to have office Christmas parties. This diverted those journalists from what would otherwise have been hostile reporting of the same publication.

simple misinformation with a strong and relevant fact-check²⁴). In the same way, “going negative” and attacking anti-pluralist voices with righteous or disproportionate hyperbole was known to strengthen the popularity of those voices.

One contributor highlighted the gap between the way in which those who support human rights tend to see the democratic public sphere as a generally fair and structured debate, whereas populists tend to shout that the “game is fixed”.²⁵ This gap is related to the apparent arrogance with which many spokespeople for human rights communicate their side of a story by reference only to their own professional authority: for example, a lawyer telling viewers of a TV news item only that three separate judges have decided a particularly unwell baby should have the right to a dignified death, juxtaposed in the same report by the distraught parents talking about their fight to keep their son alive.

Some alternative communications models for rights issues that were briefly discussed included:

- The need for stories about how our collective inheritance of human right principles actually makes us more protected and secure, individually and as a society, and fewer stories about rights being engines of social change. Almost everyone feels a degree of fear about how fast and unpredictably the world is changing, so do not make rights sound like a revolutionary option.
- The need for more stories about how The Little Guy has successfully used his rights to fight the Big State, rather than narratives about human rights institutions constraining executive action in democratic States.²⁶
- A focus on the history of human rights, referencing examples where people can feel distinct national or cultural pride in the instruments’ foundation, protection or realisation.
- Use of the ancient concept of sanctuary in relation to refugee and migration issues.²⁷
- Appeals to the competitive instincts of businesses/corporations by ranking them in terms of human rights compliance. Businesses look at reputational and revenue risks, and human rights can increasingly impact on both, thanks to the real-time transparency of social media. For the Public Sector, their bottom line risk is entirely reputational but even local authorities are susceptible to a little friendly rivalry about the extent of their respect for liberty, equality and justice.
- Creating a culture of human rights means expanding beyond the concept of State Duty. As one expert put it, “We have been a field very much focused on negative rights, whereas the majority of the European public maybe care more about positive rights such as the right to health.”

The final point raises ethical and strategic questions if any organisation’s research or advocacy agenda is to be altered to focus more on majority-concern rights than

²⁴ A successful example of fact-checking as public communication strategy was FRA’s effective response, based on findings from their *Violence Against Women Survey*, which countered racist statements made after the 2015-6 New Year’s sexual assaults in Cologne.

²⁵ See David Roberts [piece on this dynamic in US politics and media](#).

²⁶ See the [British story of Mark Neary fighting to free his son](#) who was unlawfully incarcerated in a hospital.

²⁷ In 2005, the [City of Sanctuary movement](#) was founded to create a culture of hospitality for people seeking sanctuary in the UK. This movement reclaims the original meaning of asylum that has been drowned out by media fear-mongering. To do this it builds on existing, ancient, ideas of sanctuary, hospitality and citizenship of particular places (the host cities, now around 90).

minority/discrimination issues. One data expert suggested that this might be a false dichotomy since, he predicted, in only five or ten years the so-called surveillance economy arising from “the fourth industrial revolution” will mean that we are all going to have the potential to become “minorities of one...at the wrong end of an algorithmic decision”.²⁸

The majority of participants expressed views suggesting that human rights are best communicated in instrumental terms, rather than as ends in themselves. This means specifying the clear and concrete benefit that a specific right brings to its holder. “Ask yourself,” advised one experienced journalist, “what is the information I’m providing going to do to help the average citizen? And the answer cannot be telling them The Truth or educating them about human rights!” Another way of putting this was the injunction to make every human rights story **relevant**: finding out how the issue will relate to a specific audience’s concern for “me, my friends or family”, or appealing to a common identity that is not just political or national (e.g. mothers, fathers, women, workers, etc). It was also felt to be counter-productive not to admit that some rights have more daily relevance than others,²⁹ even though this hierarchy of relevance may be very different from the legal hierarchy (derogability, justiciability etc).

After an effective frame has been chosen for a message, success will still ultimately depend on its form and style. The meeting’s discussion was often a reminder of many old, familiar lessons that have not yet been fully learned or implemented – at least not by organisations and institutions concerned to limit the rise of xenophobia, tribalism and extremism. These lessons are those of **simplification, visualisation and dramatization**.



There is art and science to all of these techniques. As one participant from the world of advertising put it, one “must be careful not to spend 80 % of time and resources on the process of identifying target audiences and only 20 % of time and resources on creative content”.

The need for **simple, accessible language**, together with avoidance of abstraction (keeping metaconcepts like ‘Freedom’ and ‘Justice’ to an absolute minimum) was reiterated. There is still good reason to publish in-depth research, but there simultaneously needs to be a different approach to publications or messages intended for the general public (doing away with the conventional formalities and assertions of institutional authority that typically ‘book-end’ any statement or report, for example).

The need for more **visual communication** was championed by graphic designers and the producers of photo/video campaign materials, as it was noted that humans have 32 visual areas in our brains, allowing us to catch visual information much more quickly and easily than textual information. Visualisation was also championed, however, by speechwriters, who emphasised the impact of metaphor and metonymy within writing. The distinction between the verbal and visual was described as a false distinction, in

²⁸ See also *Surveillance in Europe* by David Wright & Reinhard Kreissl eds. (2015).

²⁹ [‘The Privacy Paradox’](#) highlights the fact that ordinary people do not care equally about all human rights: they are willing to trade their right to privacy so as to order a pizza, but not, of course, their right to inhuman and degrading treatment.

that the best writing is also highly visual.³⁰ A satirical cartoonist recommended the benefits of “**cartoon thinking**” when developing any effective message. Cartoons do not, in general, capture complexity but they are instantly engaging and thereby act as “shop fronts” to draw people in, get them thinking and asking questions. “They are not about ‘being funny’ but about the use of ‘wit’ to make an audience see things afresh, in unfamiliar ways.” They are propositional: asking you to either agree or disagree. They are memorable and they are easy to circulate very widely via social media.³¹

“Probably it is better to put off using words as long as possible and get one’s meaning as clear as one can through pictures and sensations.”

George Orwell, ‘[Politics and the English Language](#)’ (1946)

Above all, it was emphasised that every communication should tell a story. Such **dramatization** involves, most commonly, **personalisation**: giving a large scale issue a human face that can shrink the issue’s dimensions until it becomes clearer to the moral and emotional eye.³² Human stories engage at gut level and direct testimony is uniquely powerful. When communicating to groups other than policy makers, therefore, all statistics and legal positions should ideally be embedded within engaging human stories. One epistemologist quoted the (apocryphal) Stalin line: “One death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic”. It was clear to everyone that lecturing a public audience about human rights instruments and legal theory is neither appropriate nor persuasive, but, less obviously, it was noted that so-called “myth-busting messages”, often used by campaigners, are equally ineffective unless attached to a dramatized narrative. Most people, for example, overestimate the number of refugees in Europe, but they do not absorb more accurate statistics when these are presented. Finally, given growing public distrust of so many human rights institutions, it was recognised that humanising the work of these institutions, while telling the story of a particular rights issue, can send two positive messages at once.³³

How the identity of **the messenger** impacts on the success of a communication was a theme of the meeting. Resisting the tendency towards polarisation, it was felt important to find any conservative allies who are willing to speak to their own audiences about how human rights could be reclaimed as a “lost treasure” of libertarian or religious traditions. Conservatives can emphasise how human rights, as part of the rule of law, offer protection, order and stability through peaceful change.³⁴ Similarly, coalitions with charities and advocacy organisations that do not self-identify as rights organisations

³⁰ See, for example, the products of *CreativityWorks* consultancy for the [Open Rights Group](#).

³¹ There is abundant evidence from Twitter analytics that such cartoons do bring people into progressive discussion websites who otherwise would not enter. Occasionally they attract hostile attention, but that can be good publicity for a cause too, and brings a wider community into the debate. For example, the cartoon reproduced in this report generated 30,900 impressions from a single retweet in June 2017 and, if all previous tweets/re-tweets of that cartoon were added together, the number of impressions would run in the 100,000s.

³² Note that the use of ‘human interest’ stories is not merely a stylistic decision, however, but also, in the language of communication theory, a frame.

³³ The Office of the Ombudsman of Croatia made [a video](#) (on a small budget, using only a smartphone camera and basic video-editing software) that explains the current Ombudswoman’s direct work with refugees in a way which has humanised/promoted the Office itself, making it feel more accessible and value-driven in its actions. This video was viewed over 6,100 times on FRA’s Facebook page and shared 74+ times from that source as of June 2017. It was also viewed hundreds of times from the Croatian source site’s link to Vimeo and tweeted by the European Network of National Human Rights Institutions (ENNHRI).

³⁴ [The Thomas Paine Initiative](#) is a collaborative grant-making programme designed to make human rights a broader public concern. They want to write “a new song about human rights and to give it a different chorus line” of messengers. A determinedly non-partisan organisation, they have recently given a substantial grant to Bright Blue, a British Conservative think-tank, for work on human rights.

(those working for children or the elderly, for example) were cited as successful ways to establish more trusted interaction with the majority population.³⁵ In general, it was recognised that governmental institutions cannot “do it alone” and that claiming credit for communications, or the information they contain, too often gets in the way of the end goal: there are many journalists, for example, who prefer to be pointed towards sources and issues rather than receiving an official statement or report.

Some techniques and tools are really only about **grabbing attention**; but this is a significant first hurdle if addressing an indifferent or disengaged mass audience. Human rights suffer from an image problem of being considered overly worthy and serious. Techniques for lightening dark material were therefore discussed. Examples included:

- Staged stunts (videoed and shared via social media)³⁶
- At national level, cartoons and other forms of comedy/satire.³⁷ One of George Lakoff’s pieces of advice, about how to avoid responding within the negative frame of an adversary, is that satirising such a frame can work. However, this is very difficult in a pan-European context where there is a risk of comedy not only failing to translate but perhaps giving rise to offence and misunderstanding.
- Music, public sculpture and other artistic works that reach a mass audience.³⁸ Music, in particular, can communicate directly to the emotions and is a universal language.³⁹
- Attractive people⁴⁰ and celebrity involvement.

Being provocative or original and thereby grabbing attention is not, however, an end in itself. It must lead towards other forms of subtler and/or value-driven communication. There were warnings against jumping on the bandwagon of vloggers and social media pranksters, for example, just because these are relatively new and youthful techniques. Those investing budgets in such communications were urged to **evaluate efficacy** in terms of measurably shifting opinions or drawing new groups into active and lasting support for rights issues. Often this has not been measured rigorously enough. In this regard, an academic participant wished to make others aware of a distortion in the literature on the psychology of communication: namely, that it is overwhelmingly based on measuring immediate effects. It is very difficult to track someone’s values or views at more than one time point, and for this reason psychologists have favoured investigating the immediately measurable effect of a delivered message, not the longevity or depth of its impact.

³⁵ For example, *Equally Ours* worked in collaboration with the *AgeUK* charity and created a [video about the rights of an elderly man named Charles](#), which has received 1.8 million views.

³⁶ The issue of exploitation of domestic maids in the Middle East, for example, was highlighted by this [comically uncomfortable film](#) – Interestingly, there was an ethical issue involved in so far as they had had to conflate two separate human rights issues to come up with one eye-catching stunt: i.e. the ‘maids stores’ do not exist in the Middle East, but only elsewhere in Asia, so geographical truth had to be sacrificed for the sake of a campaign that attracted attention. Evidence of success: over 1 million followers on Facebook and the attention of national media.

³⁷ See, for example, the [Atlas of Prejudice](#) by Yanko Tsvetkov.

³⁸ FRA’s report on the [High Level Experts Meeting on the relationship between Human Rights and the Arts](#).

³⁹ See, for example, the Bollywood-style music video, [‘The Welcome’](#), which was made in 2014 to promote the UN’s *Free & Equal* campaign. This was viewed by 2.2 million people in its first year of release, making it the most watched UN video of all time.

⁴⁰ See the [UNHCR video about a Syrian refugee who became a top surfer](#), which was taken by CNN almost in its entirety.

Developing messages

One key question was identified as “How to achieve **scale and reach**?” The answer from several commercial-sector experts was to test messages on small samples of the demographic target audience, discover which message is most effective, and then, and only then, to scale up and repeat the message persistently. This iterative process of testing assumptions and adapting according to audience reaction can learn much from the agile management processes of contemporary App development.

Human rights **research and communications/advocacy** were seen, ideally, as being interlaced, rather than chronologically separate steps in a production process. FRA has a clear commitment to research methods that involve and empower their subjects (“nothing about us without us”). Now the same spirit of openness to direct involvement should apply to audiences too: if the audience is intended to be under 20s, for example, then a certain number of young people must be consulted on the design of message content.⁴¹ One participant was particularly passionate about how “everybody has to be the messenger on human rights, not just a small cadre of professional activists”.

What Comms Teams can learn from Teachers

A leading educationalist recounted the evidence-based success of several techniques in his field, applicable by analogy to adults working professionally on human rights promotion among the general public. He urged practitioners to make research an active part of solving the communications problem – using research projects, in other words, to bring two segregated parts of a community into contact with one another for the first time. The teaching of values has proved most effective through experiential or active learning (or what the Americans call ‘service learning’) – giving children behavioural opportunities, such as conducting interviews with vulnerable members of a minority community. This real experience is what changes opinions, so creation of such opportunities should be in-built to research project design. [See, for example, [a video](#) made by 17-18 year olds who were trained in conducting interviews on human rights issues with other young people in Germany and Tunisia].

There was also acknowledgement of the continuing need to bring people directly together, face-to-face, irrespective of (or sometimes via) new technologies.⁴² Institutions that speak and listen only behind the veil of multipliers and filters (including sympathetic, campaigning journalists) will always be the last to hear important shifts in public opinion. A radical experiment that started in Belgium in 2014 was described: an event had invited members of the general public to have private conversations with ‘experts’, all of which were livestreamed using directional microphones so that it was possible for observers (e.g. journalists) to tune in and eavesdrop on them, one-by-one, as they took place.⁴³ This is the kind of forum in which reactions to ‘expert’ messages could be easily tested. In this way, local engagement could be part of a message-development strategy, even for an international agency.

⁴¹ On the importance of engaging young people in order to shift values, the model of UNAIDS, who have a Youth Board with a direct reporting line to the Director, was cited.

⁴² *BECAUSE*, a Canadian company, works on developing small digital tools for the larger social good, including the recent development of an [App](#) that brings people together to collaborate voluntarily on certain tasks or problems.

⁴³ See ‘[Kenniss is Macht 2](#)’; this event is well described in context in a [video](#), from minute 36 onwards. Similar are the [Norwegian Kom Inn dinners](#) where an app matches you to dine with a local person of opposite views/values but who holds other shared interests.

Understanding the media and other multipliers

Many citizens now only receive news from social media sources, while actively avoiding mainstream media.⁴⁴ In parallel to this trend, however, new types of high quality, investigative **journalism** are emerging, thanks in part to the rising number of freelance journalists who are no longer constrained by the edicts of a single editor or newsroom. One of the many interesting strands of journalism currently developing is data journalism, where analysts are given access to raw data and find the stories within it for themselves.⁴⁵ Another is ‘immersive journalism’, which uses virtual reality presentation to prompt visceral responses from a news story’s audience.⁴⁶ There is also a growing movement called ‘constructive journalism’, which aims for the journalist to offer a range of alternative solutions to each problem that he or she reports.⁴⁷ This solution-oriented approach is essentially about journalists choosing a more ‘prognostic’ frame (e.g. ‘what can be done to help victims of gender-based violence’) over – or at least alongside – a ‘diagnostic’ frame (e.g. ‘this is how many women die due to gender-based violence’).⁴⁸ Remaining impartial and critical, impervious to spin and “public relations fluff”, was noted as being particularly challenging when a journalist is presenting a human rights story from such a ‘constructive’ angle.

For any institution such as FRA, the newly emerging media landscape implies less use of press releases and announcements,⁴⁹ with proportionately greater emphasis on data transparency, multimedia content and visualisation, including visual imagery beyond infographics.⁵⁰ A clear and inviting website is a pre-requisite, combined with the strategic use of social media platforms, since no organisation can afford to just sit and wait for its site to be visited. Highlights have to be extracted from data and communicated to journalists and other message multipliers in the most enticing and digestible ways.⁵¹ Often the most effective strategy was reported to be a **combination of new and traditional media**, working in symbiosis.⁵²

⁴⁴ This is the single biggest change since issues of human rights in the media were surveyed in 2000 by the *International Council on Human Rights Policy*. See ‘[Journalism, Media and the Challenge of Human Rights Reporting](#)’.

⁴⁵ For example, Spiegel online [published results from a discrimination testing of the German housing market](#). It showed that persons with a foreign name, especially Arabic or Turkish name, experienced higher rates of discrimination when looking for housing than persons with German names. The results were derived from around 20,000 housing queries conducted by *Datenjournalisten des Bayerischen Rundfunks und des SPIEGEL*.

⁴⁶ See, for example: [The Guardian and its Solitary Confinement](#).

⁴⁷ For example, see the [Constructive Journalism Project](#) and [Positive News](#).

⁴⁸ There is [evidence](#) that prognostic framing helps inspire action among less engaged participants.

⁴⁹ One journalist bluntly summarised the problem of governmental announcements to date: “EU communications are mostly dull, dry and jargon-driven. They’re focused on process rather than effect.”

⁵⁰ See the use of maps, for e.g. [Freedom of the Press – Reporters without borders](#). Also note the University of Utrecht [research on how data visualisation should be conveyed](#).

⁵¹ See, for example, the methods used by [The Pew Research Center](#), which is a non-partisan ‘fact tank’ in Washington DC.

⁵² The *Glasnost* ad agency worked with HIVOS and the Municipality of The Hague on a Campaign to Stop Child Labour, and they did so by using famous Instagram photographers with over 100K followers in order to grab the attention of a youth audience and, at the same time, grab the attention of mainstream media. The full story of their methodology is shown in a [post-Campaign video](#).

Understanding yourself

Putting all of the above into practice requires human rights organisations, whether governmental or non-governmental, to give themselves “a wake-up call” and then “put their money where their mouth is”, as participants put it. There must be rapid **capacity building** in the human rights communications world. This is a challenge to leaders and to vested professional interests, because resource allocation and staffing structures likely need to change.⁵³ One participant wished to see “public opinion elevated to the same level as legal compliance”; another spoke of needing “to change the DNA of our institutions and organisations”. It was recognised that various strategies – of framing, style, values and audience participation – needed to be trained into virtually every employee or volunteer, especially those who may represent the organisation externally. Case studies are the meat of most human rights reports, so it is important that each institution or organisation receives the authorisation of senior leadership to maximise the impact of such human stories.

Staff in the field need to understand what new kinds of story and information can most usefully be gathered or brought to the attention of professional communicators. On the one hand, the meeting demonstrated that, in light of advances in technology and our understanding of human cognition, communication is an ever-more specialised discipline; on the other hand, the integration of communications goals within other teams and departments, such as those conducting human rights research, was recommended. Those teams can, in turn, advise communicators on how to best develop the indicators to evaluate impact of different communication strategies.

Self-examination includes defining one’s own **code of practice** about what techniques and tools one is willing to use, ensuring that human rights advocates do not inadvertently become violators of fundamental rights such as privacy and non-discrimination. Again, this is a question that has been sharpened by the rapid expansion of political micro-targeting. There was little consensus about how cautious to be in this regard; participants from the business sector were quicker than others to suggest that the ends would justify the means. One participant counselled that a middle way could be learned from the example of human rights lawyers who practice transparency but not to the detriment of their client, and who are simultaneously strategic yet ethical.

Institutional transparency was discussed as a communications strategy itself, to restore public trust and raise awareness, and to change opinions about human rights bodies that are increasingly vilified by populist media.⁵⁴ Such bodies are often accused of being democratically unaccountable, so openness and public accountability are not incidental policy questions.

Self-knowledge, in this context, also involves realism about one’s own limitations, of mandate, resources, skills and technical knowledge. There will clearly be different approaches required for organisations working at different (local/national/regional/global)

⁵³ An example of structural change was given by a journalist, describing how *Buzzfeed* and *Quartz* have reorganised their newsdesks so that they no longer mirror the structure of government bureaucracies (Health, Crime, etc) but are instead grouped around bundles of issues for a specific demographic (e.g. schools and children and women’s issues); the emphasis, in other words, is on relevance and framing within the context of ordinary people’s everyday lives.

⁵⁴ By analogy, the EU border agency, *Frontex*, was cited as successfully implementing a policy of total transparency, including to hostile journalists; they have issued 500+ invitations for journalists/observers to come to sea in their coastguard boats, with 145 full ‘embeds’ completed to date.

levels; in the case of FRA and the EU institutions, the difficulty of syndicating communications in 28 Member States with different cultures, languages and politics will not be simplified by a commitment to increasing engagement at the local level.

Collaborating for change

Building constituencies, empowering rights bearers, influencing change leaders: all require strong networks and coalitions. The overwhelming majority of the meeting's participants, enriched by the two days of discussions, called on FRA to help facilitate the foundation of a new, permanent **network for human rights communicators**.

"We can all try out each other's methods and then give feedback on lessons learned. We all need very practical advice on how to build values-based messages for various different audiences."

Anon NGO participant

There was a call to raise grants for transversal communications research and evaluation across different rights issues in different countries and cultures. The urgent need for a **secure online repository** to collect the findings of such research, so that the greatest number of organisations

can benefit from them, was likewise agreed. Strategies, tools, methodologies, internal policies and external success stories could also be shared on such a platform, so as to avoid reinventing the wheel in each country. One participant warned that such a platform should not become Eurocentric, but should gather global developments.

Coalitions with charities and non-rights-based advocacy groups must be formed to encircle each issue. Alliances between civil society and the private sector should also be encouraged where they share common aims. Nationalism, for example, is no good for international corporations, and, on that basis, they may be willing to help resource values-driven communications and any networks that will work to promote them.

Journalists should not be treated only as conduits for reaching the public. They are frequently partners who are also struggling with the changing ground rules in this 'post-truth era', who depend upon the health of human rights law in order to operate freely, and who generally share the same aspiration of greater two-way engagement with the widest possible public audience. One participant bluntly told the human rights agencies in the room: "Send more of your staff on journalism training." Conversely, human rights defenders need to produce toolkits to inform journalists, editors, media regulators and media owners about some of the pitfalls, strategies and principles relating to better human rights reporting.⁵⁵

Links with universities, who are not just researchers but also educators and hence communicators, were recommended.⁵⁶ Collaborations with popular literary, visual and performing artists were to be encouraged because of art's unique ability to trigger our emotional connection to certain values.⁵⁷ Close dialogue with faith leaders and their

⁵⁵ See the [Ethical Journalism Network](#).

⁵⁶ An example of an Australian university producing [short videos](#) to educate the general public.

⁵⁷ Less commercial work can communicate more complex understanding of human rights issues and should be brought to wider audiences by advocates: see, for example, the photography of Richard Mosse, the documentary film about Lampedusa *Fire At Sea* (2016), or BBC Scotland's recent radio thriller about extraordinary rendition, *Big Sky* by Anna Maloney (2017). FRA's report of [High Level Expert Meeting on the relationship between Human Rights and the Arts](#).

communities is also crucial to work in the area of public values, at least if Haidt's approach to evoking the full range of societal values is favoured.⁵⁸

Among other unlikely allies are those working within Member States on presenting public law online in a more accessible and searchable way. The use of chatbots as a quicker way to process whether individual concerns have human rights answers was similarly suggested (for example, the chatbot being developed to triage the reception and integration services needs of asylum seekers and refugees in European countries where they settle⁵⁹). This is a communications tactic linked to accessing justice and implementing positive rights.

The meeting included a session for the experts to advise on FRA's **2018 Fundamental Rights Forum**.⁶⁰ This event can facilitate international collaboration between human rights communicators. Sessions at the Forum, in which campaigners and activists could be trained by experts on values and framing, were suggested, for example. It is hard work to convert each human rights 'product' (report or topic) into a set of value-based, story-led messages, so workshops where organisations could bring their own materials and work on them alongside experienced creatives and analysts might be very useful. FRA was itself advised to commit a budget to the hiring of external communications specialists (data analysts, re-branders and marketeers, media specialists, designers and other creatives) and then, at the Forum next year, report on early results from this approach.

See the **Recommendations** addressing different international, European and national actors hereafter.

⁵⁸ FRA's [High Level Expert Meeting on the relationship between Human Rights and Religion](#), Vienna, 12-13 September 2017.

⁵⁹ See *The Guardian*, '[Chatbot that overturned 160,000 parking fines now helping refugees claim asylum](#)'.

⁶⁰ The Fundamental Rights Forum is a biennial event, open to the public, the last of which was [held in 2016](#).

Action points that emerged from participants at the meeting

To all governmental, non-governmental and inter-governmental communicators of rights and freedoms:

- Identify your audience and ensure that you understand their concerns.
- Segment this audience as far as resources, technology and human rights considerations allow.
- Identify your audience's core values and how these relate to the rights you aim to promote.
- Identify the framework behind each communication and the values it should trigger.
- Aim for simplicity of language, and the scrubbing out of jargon.
- Do not assume any knowledge about, nor interest in, human rights law and practice.
- Think and communicate visually, even when writing.
- Think and communicate in terms of human stories, and with relevance to your audience.
- Identify who will be most welcomed as a messenger and work with them if you can.
- Invest in expertise and innovation to ensure that your communications are lively and powerful.
- Repeat your message persistently and evaluate whether it makes an impact.

To EU Member States and national parliaments:

- Dramatically increase your work to promote and mainstream human rights norms, communicating with disengaged segments of your own populations and taking note of the many strategies cited in this report.

To the European Commission and Parliament:

- Coordinate initiatives that more forcefully promote rights and freedoms, both in terms of their values and value, to disengaged segments of the European public.
- Provide material support for networks, platforms and collaborations of civil society communicators who share these same goals.

To national human rights and other civil society organisations:

- Prioritise communications directed to disengaged segments of the general public and which will trigger or shape their values to be more rights-supportive, taking note of the strategies, replicable examples and research cited in this report.
- Join networks and coalitions to share further communications expertise and research.
- Invest substantially in communications, especially those which utilise new media to reach disengaged segments of the general public in innovative ways.

To FRA (and other international organisations):

- Support the development and sharing of best practice with regard to:
 - methodologies for audience analysis,
 - methodologies for message testing and audience involvement,
 - methodologies for triggering or shaping rights-supportive values,
 - methodologies for rigorously evaluating both the immediate and long-term impact of human rights communications.
- Do so by co-ordinating a community/network of communicators in Europe and by establishing a secure extranet repository for relevant research and strategies.
- Develop communications strategies aimed at combining value-driven messages with other, more instrumental arguments about the utility and relevance of human rights.
- Conduct research or other grassroots projects in ways that directly involve those who are your identified audience (together with those whose rights are violated or at risk of violation).
- Produce more simplified, visual and engaging messages for public consumption, while still producing detailed evidence as and when required by policy makers and journalists.
- Use fact-checking to counter public misinformation in particular crises concerning rights violations, but generally avoid instant reactions to news events if these will force you to respond within a negative frame.
- Commit to investment in communications, and engage with the development of new digital applications and tools to promote rights and freedoms.
- Work alongside journalists to ensure the more accurate, fair, balanced and impartial reporting of human rights issues, in particular through the development of a specialised Media Toolkit.
- Ensure that staff in all areas of your organisation understand the principles applied to any communication with the public, the media or elected politicians.

To the European media:

- Work alongside human rights advocates to ensure the more accurate, fair, balanced and impartial reporting of human rights issues.
- Engage in collaborative critical examination of frameworks and terminology used in the coverage of human rights issues, and attend training on any rights issues that regularly feature in your work.

FRA will consider these proposals but without prejudice to its independent mandate and its specific decision-making process.



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