

Human Rights Communicators' Leadership Seminar

Summary report and outlook

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At a time when extremists and populists, with anti-rights agendas and the assistance of fake news, are gathering greater support, human rights actors need to improve their public communications if they are to protect successfully long-standing norms. To debate possible approaches and to learn from successful recent communication practices, FRA hosted a Human Rights Communicators' Leadership Seminar. It brought together leading communicators from a range of local, national, regional and international organisations, both inter-governmental and non-governmental.

Developing a toolbox for communication strategies

The seminar followed a meeting of private sector, academic, political and other specialist communication experts, convened by FRA in the spring of 2017. The expert meeting and seminar are part of a process to develop a toolbox for communication strategies, which began in late 2015.¹ The 2017 expert meeting advised pro-rights communicators to take **an approach better designed to prioritise and influence public opinion**.² They agreed that it is now the time, amid political and technological upheaval, to take bold risks with both the form and content of public communications.

Fourteen participants presented **case studies**. They illustrated how many organisations are already experimenting with new approaches in their daily work and achieving impressive results.³ Lessons learned from these case studies will be incorporated into a **'Communications checklist/toolbox'**, as one of the agreed next steps.

Communicating rights: basic principles

Leading communication practitioners at the seminar agreed with the action points from the expert meeting in spring 2017. These broadly concerned:

- segmenting and truly understanding public audiences;
- framing, tailoring and testing messages;
- enhancing techniques of simplification, visualisation and dramatization;
- finding trusted messengers;
- making new alliances and using more participatory methodologies;
- embracing new technologies when communicating;
- strengthening communication for and with news media;
- better evaluating the affect of communications.

Key points

During the seminar, practitioners supplemented and qualified the experts' recommendations, emphasising the following points:

- **Respecting distinct roles and mandates:**
Inter-governmental organisations, semi-public bodies, civil society organisations and activists each have distinct roles, mandates, agenda and capacities to change their communications in the various ways recommended. These differences need to be acknowledged, however firm the common ground. Variations in national circumstances also mean that not every technique is transferrable.

¹ FRA and Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior (2015), *Developing a toolbox for communication strategies*, Meeting report, Vienna. This process is now embedded in FRA's strategic, multi-annual priorities: see Priority 4 of the [FRA Programming Document 2018-2020](#), pp. 14-15.

² FRA (2017), *How to better communicate common values, fundamental rights and freedoms – Meeting report*, Luxembourg, Publications Office. See, in particular, the action points from the meeting, pp. 18-19.

³ See list of workshop case study presentations in Annex.

- **Respecting multilingualism:**
The importance of connecting the universal with the local was fully endorsed. Many practitioners, however, are acutely aware of the practical linguistic challenge this poses, especially for global or pan-European organisations. This is especially the case if the language used in future is more visual, emotionally meaningful and devoid of bureaucratic jargon.
- **Accessing and listening to legitimate public concerns:**
How – in practical terms – can institutions and other professionals in the human rights field routinely hear public concerns? How can they consider these to avoid issuing ‘one-way’ messages to persuade or educate? Participants recognised the need for laws and policies to answer certain concerns – for example public concern about fulfilling social rights or access to justice. If not, communicators risk raising false expectations about the current system.
- **Embracing positivity:**
Human rights supporters face a particular challenge in terms of communicating hope and reassurance. They should not lose the critical approach central to so much human rights law and research nor abandon the duty to sound the alarm. Yet, participants fully agreed that their communications have to inspire positive associations in the public imagination, if rights are to secure the public’s future support.
- **Choosing the ‘right messenger’:**
Experts highlighted the importance of choosing the right messenger. Rights communicators emphasised this point in terms of overcoming public distrust of their organisations and institutions. Many of the successful case studies presented involved rights-holders or other trusted figures (such as midwives, ex-police officers and street vloggers) speaking in their own words directly to those who could ‘relate’ to them – albeit within a well-planned and financed strategy.
- **Deciding which core values to trigger:**
Some participants advocated using story ‘frames’ that appeal only to the more liberal and selfless values of the European public. Any appeal to more non-liberal or authoritarian values was akin to responding within an opponent’s frame. Others believed that the most effective communications will appeal to the widest possible range of core values, all of which are within each of us to varying degrees.
- **Breaking our own habits of divisive thinking:**
Several participants criticised the use of an ‘us and them’ rhetoric when discussing the general public. While it is important to admit responsibility for the profound harm done by this elitist attitude in the past, it is equally important to move forward with a less divisive language and attitude.

Next steps

For FRA and human rights communicators:

- 1. Establishing an informal network for human rights communicators:**

Participants welcome the drive for a new, informal network for human rights communicators, in order to continue the current process of international and regional discussion and cooperation. FRA offered to facilitate such a network; the agency will develop the terms of reference, including suggesting the best online platform(s) for such a network.
- 2. Developing a communicators' checklist or toolbox:**

Participants support the concept of a 'checklist' or 'toolbox' to encapsulate effective elements of the public communication approach being discussed. Professional practitioners would refer to this in their own work and in training others. FRA agreed to take the lead on the drafting and design of such a checklist/toolkit but invited further suggestions and comments so that it would be useful to as many organisations as possible.
- 3. Using the Fundamental Rights Forum 2018 to communicate and engage with the public:**

Participants value the forthcoming [2018 FRA Fundamental Rights Forum](#) as an opportunity to communicate positively to many national audiences on fundamental rights and their underlying values. The Forum should engage directly with public fears about human rights and be as geographically and demographically diverse as possible. As a general principle, the Forum's purpose and public statements must not be presented defensively.

For FRA, relevant inter-governmental and civil society organisations:

- 4. Communicating how human rights are relevant and indispensable to everyone:**

Public support for international human rights and the institutions that protect them has been declining for several decades, and more dramatically in recent years. Today there is a valuable window of opportunity in which the international community can, and must, address the causes of this. This involves more effectively communicating how human rights are relevant and indispensable to everyone.
- 5. Promoting public trust in the human rights system:**

Leaders of intergovernmental and related human rights organisations should not only respect and protect human rights wherever they are violated or at risk of violation. They should also proactively and unequivocally promote public trust in the whole human rights system. This should include greater emphasis on the complementarity, in Europe, of the three major human rights instruments: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. For the EU, recent EU Council Resolutions⁴ have underlined the importance of this communication task.

⁴ See Council Resolution 12913/17 of 12 October 2017: "The Council recalls the importance of awareness-raising on the application of the Charter at national as well as at EU level among policymakers, legal practitioners *and the rights holders themselves*. [Emphasis added]. In the same Resolution, the Council invites FRA "to work together with Member States to facilitate the exchange of good practices, tools and methods on the application of the Charter *and on the communication of fundamental rights, values and freedoms*." [Emphasis added]

6. **Supporting human rights communicators and networking initiatives:**
Resolve implies political and material support for human rights communicators who are organising public campaigns. It also means establishing projects to engage in dialogue, or conducting research to better understand public concerns and/or monitor shifts in public attitudes. This includes support for networking initiatives that share ideas and effective practice, as well as for rights-based civil society organisations and independent media whenever they may be threatened or silenced.

Additional responsibilities of EU Member States:

7. **Promoting human rights law and defending instruments and institutions from further attack:**
Each EU Member State has the duty to proactively raise awareness about the importance of human rights law. It should also strenuously defend human rights' instruments and institutions whenever they are wrongfully attacked. This responsibility derives from each state's commitment as a signatory to those instruments. It also relates to their membership of a Union founded upon common values, fundamental rights and freedoms. In such actions, governments should enter public debate – for example, to defend the rule of law, including international human rights law, against the charge of being 'anti-democratic'.
8. **Instilling a culture of tolerance, respect and equity:**
EU Member States should invest generously in civic education to highlight universal rights and responsibilities. This investment should start from the very earliest years of education and continue all the way into higher education. Such education should involve 'active learning' wherever possible, and ensure that the right of free speech is itself respected in classroom discussions. This stems from the Member States' duty to promote and protect human rights, and falls under the auspices of the European Commission's Strategic Framework 2020.

Annex: List of case study presentations

Case study	Organisation	Presenter/s
Getting the message – how accessibility improves communications for all	EU Network for Independent Living	Zara Todd
Effective communication: the brain perspective	Mindbridge Center	Laura Ligouri, Executive Director
Digital storytelling in the age of distraction	Greenpeace	Mathias Schuh, Digital Mobilisation Officer
Why the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is still relevant 70 years after?	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR)	Laurent Sauveur, Chief External Outreach
Creating viral campaigns: ‘Dear future mom’	Coordown	Federico De Cesare Viola, PR and Campaign Manager
Framing and communicating equality	Equinet and ILGA Europe	Sarah Cooke O’Dowd, Communication Officer Steve Taylor, Communications Director
The EU Fundamental Rights Colloquium: communicating women’s rights in turbulent times	European Commission	Giles Goodall, Head of Unit for Communication, Strategy and Planning, DG Justice
Communicating the politically incorrect	<i>Institut for Menneske Rettigheder</i> (The Danish Institute for Human Rights)	Esben Geist, Head of Communication
Connecting human rights to the men and women in the street	<i>College voor de Rechten van de Mens</i> (Netherlands Institute for Human Rights)	Quirine Eijkman, Vice-Chair
Better understanding UK public attitudes to human rights	Human Rights Watch UK	David Mepham, Director
FRABot: using algorithms to counter hate speech	European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA)	Graham Patterson, Documentation and Online Communication Manager
Research grants (scholarships) for journalists	<i>Deutsches Institut für Menschenrechte</i> (German Institute for Human Rights)	Bettina Hildebrand, Head of Communication/ Spokesperson
The importance of positive imagery	Open Society Foundation	Daniel Makonnen, Communications Officer
Getting citizens to change social reality	Citizens Network Watchdog Poland	Katarzyna Batko-Toluc, Programme Director and Board Member
Communication checklist: what should be included in a hands-on online checklist on human rights communication?	Independent consultancy European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA)	Ophelia Field, Independent consultant Nicole Romain, Head of Sector Editing and Production