



10 keys to effectively communicating human rights

For all weblinks, check out our online version!

These 10 keys sum up the core points communicators and practitioners in various fields raised in FRA's expert meetings, practitioners' seminars and focus groups in 2017 and 2018.

Read more at:

<http://fra.europa.eu/en/node/25912>

<http://fra.europa.eu/en/node/26259>

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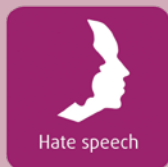
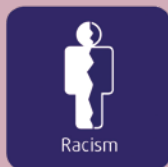
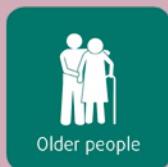
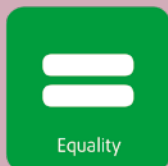
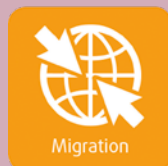
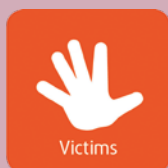
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// **FRA delivers on its responsibility**
as the acknowledged, unique and independent
centre of reference and excellence
for the promotion and protection of the human
rights of everyone in the European Union."





“Tell a human story”

Most people understand issues through anecdotes and personal stories, rather than statistics. Show the human face behind the evidence to tap into emotion and give rights holders a voice ●

DOS AND DON'TS



Even if numbers are your specialty – try to humanise them.



Encourage your researchers to collect personal testimonies. Use only with consent!



Don't forget audio – someone reluctant to appear on-screen may be fine with sharing their voice.

Why?

It is an important reality to acknowledge: human beings are driven by emotions more than by rational thought. This means your communication will make much more of an impact if you draw out the emotional meaning and drama in your story.

How?

Present personal stories that bring your evidence and arguments to emotional life. It's not about being more emotional about your own views. Instead, recognise the emotional and dramatic elements within your material that will prompt positive reactions.

This includes connecting legal positions and statistics to personal stories to give them a human face. For example, a victim describing the agony and trauma of racial abuse will make your point more effectively than a statistic on the proportion of people affected by hate crime.

If you don't have consent to use someone's personal testimony or experience, use anonymous, representative or hypothetical examples. Especially for videos, though, testimony spoken by the person themselves is priceless.

Show the faces in your own organisation, too. Make it look less like a distant bureaucracy or out-of-touch 'talking shop' by telling a human story about your staff's ground-level work.

Getting it right

→ For a very effective way of humanising the UK's Human Rights Act, see the video on [how a father fought to free his son unlawfully held in a hospital](#).

→ The UNHCR's [video about a Syrian refugee who became a top surfer](#) was so catchy that a major news outlet (CNN) used it almost in its entirety.

→ The Ombuds Office of Croatia did a great job giving itself a human face – on a shoe-string budget. Check out their [video](#) on their direct work with refugees.

→ A young Austrian woman's [story about having her headscarf torn off](#) brought to life the EU Fundamental Rights Agency's findings on Muslims in the EU.

Agreeing to disagree

Nobody says you have to abandon the fight to maintain rational public debate. But keep in mind that triggering unconscious emotions can also be used to push the public to land on rational ground.

Not convinced about the power of emotions? Read more on what psychology and neuro-science tell us about what makes humans act on [Mindbridge's website](#).



// Identify issues of broader interest to the general public //

Relate to people's day-to-day experiences – particularly if your communications usually focus on issues affecting minorities •

DOS AND DON'TS



Don't assume your audience cares just because you do.



Don't be condescending.



Don't use divisive language. It just won't reach those who don't already agree with you.

Why?

Many human rights campaigns focus on the rights of minorities, rather than on the social, economic and cultural rights of majority populations. This is understandable – minorities encounter more human rights abuses. But addressing concerns of a broader population can help build wider support for human rights.

How?

Don't waste your energy on those who won't be persuaded. Target the so-called 'moveable middle' – the 40% or so who are neither strongly for, nor against, human rights.

Avoid communications that only speak to a cosmopolitan, urban audience and clearly reflect one side of the political spectrum.

Listen to those you hope to persuade. Social media makes this cheaper and easier, but do try other avenues. At minimum, talk about your issues with people not actively interested in human rights.

Food for thought

Getting this right is easier if you have a communications team that is truly diverse – not just in terms of ethnic, cultural or gender diversity, but also in terms of educational background, age and social class.

Getting it right

→ *Equally Ours* has worked on many socio-economic rights that affect broad segments of the population. With AgeUK, a charity, it created a hugely popular **video** about the rights of an elderly man named Charles, who lives in a home. The video had 1.8 million views.

→ Models for dialogue with the general public include traditional public meetings and online forums such as **Debating Europe**. An interesting **event** in Belgium involved livestreaming 1:1 conversations between experts and members of the public using directional microphones so that journalists and others could listen in.

Shortcuts

A lot of groundwork in mapping values at the global, regional and national levels has already been done. See the 2014 **Valuing Equality** report, commissioned by Equinet from the Public Interest Research Centre, and its **World Values Survey Map**.

For more localised communications, or to appeal to a very specific segment of your national 'persuadables', you will need to do your own mapping to target your audience more accurately.



// Trigger people's core values //

Avoid divisive thinking by connecting with what really matters to people. Use stories and 'frames' of your own, and consider going beyond appealing only to people's more selfless values.

DOS AND DON'TS



Keep an open mind, leave your echo chamber, and listen closely.



Show empathy.



Be imaginative.



'Decode' the frames and values underlying your opponents' messages – then focus on your own.

Why?

Some people are turned off by a strong emphasis on certain rights. But you may be able to draw their support by emphasising the values that underpin those rights.

By focusing on a particular aspect of an issue – or ‘framing’ it – you can affect how people think and feel about the issue, and how they respond to it. If your frame appeals to values they hold dear, this can shift attitudes over time.

How?

When reaching out beyond the usual human-rights crowd, don’t assume that getting people on your side means you have to trigger values you do not agree with.

Some values overlap. Work hard to identify common ground. Find values that unite rather than divide – those that can be voiced in terms of ‘we’. This may be simple kindness, or caring for family and friends.

Diving into the debate

It’s a question that will make your brain freeze – should you try to shape people’s values by appealing only to certain ones, or focus on the now and make better use of values people already hold?

To help you decide, compare what psychologist **Jonathan Haidt** has to say on moving beyond care, fairness and liberty with **Equinet’s** & **ILGA’s** toolkits, for example. The latter emphasise using intrinsic values to spark support where you least expect it.

Also have a look at what **Mindbridge**, which links insights from psychology and neuroscience to humanitarian action, says on opening people’s minds by making them feel safe and reassured about their future.

Some recommend using communications only to trigger intrinsic values because they believe that strengthening these values helps shape support for human rights.

Others see all values as ultimately having six foundations – care, fairness, loyalty, authority/respect, sanctity/purity, liberty. They believe that effective communications appeal to as many of these as possible – and that not doing this is a typical mistake ‘progressives’ make.

Agreeing to disagree

You may want to focus on all kinds of values, such as courage or respect for hard work. But beware triggering reactions that could work against you.

Some split values into ‘intrinsic’ or ‘self-transcendent’ values and ‘extrinsic’ values. Intrinsic values are tied to compassion, autonomy and freedom. This can simply mean people’s desire to be helpful, have close friends, or be independent. By contrast, ‘extrinsic’ values focus on external reward and approval. Examples include respect for ambition and success or wanting to feel secure.

Why?

Our attention spans are getting shorter every day. Just think of how short commercials have become. You just saw research showing that videos should be no longer than so-many seconds? Well, that number is lower by now.

How?

Be as brief as your material allows.

Less is not *always* more. For views and clicks, super-short social media posts may take all the medals. Similarly, video ‘teasers’ only a few seconds long can draw considerable attention.

But if you’re looking to engage your users, give them a little more. Even on Facebook, posts of 300 words do well. In other words, don’t let your stopwatch keep you from doing meaningful work.

That said – don’t fool yourself that your communication is so interesting that it will buck these trends. Say goodbye to the two-page press release. If long reports contain your most important work, invest in stand-alone summaries highlighting their catchiest insights. Don’t dismiss the power of tweets.

Important reality check: producing shorter material usually takes longer.

Getting it right

→ Celebrating 70 years of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. So, **what is a human right?** – look at the FRA tweet that went viral, including an animated UN gif.



// Get visual //

Images speak volumes! Wherever possible, use pictures, graphs, infographics and videos •

DOS AND DON'TS



Don't wait to think about photos until the moment you need one.



Don't use images that infantilise, objectify or stereotype those shown.



Don't squeeze too much into one graphic – be accurate but focus on your core message.



Kill two birds with one stone – keeping it visual means lower translation costs!

Why?

Images succinctly convey messages and trigger emotions. Your communications will be more compelling if you embrace the power of visual communication.

How?

Social media is the obvious place to emphasise visuals. Photos, videos, infographics, maps, illustrations – these all draw people in. Even online, dry data can spark strong interest when presented in an infographic.

But don't limit visuals to the digital sphere. Break up texts, including long reports, with elements that concisely present some of your main messages. Save space – use them to present unique information rather than to repeat points already made in writing.

Food for thought

Your staff can't make communications more visual if they don't have access to compelling images. Commercial databases with stock photos are cheap and quick to access. But your images will be predictable.

Consider hiring freelance photographers to take thematically relevant, timeless and appropriate photos so you have a good and unique pool to work with when the need arises.

You'll face less resistance from above if you make clear that communicating rights effectively in today's world means carving out more budget for visuals.

At minimum, see if the researchers, fieldworkers, rights defenders, lawyers or others who gather your source material can provide you with strong images.

Getting it right

→ You'd be amazed by what can be conveyed with illustrations. Yanko Tsvetkov created a buzz by mapping prejudice in his tongue-in-cheek [Atlas of Prejudice](#).

→ Research by the University of Utrecht gives interesting insights [on how to best visualise data](#).

→ For an award-winning example of using art and interaction to communicate a human rights message, see Human Rights Watch's [campaign on political prisoners in Burma](#).

Shortcuts

Don't have the time or money to find your own images?

Check out image databases for *positive* human rights photos.



“ Embrace positivity ”

Lead with positive messages to broaden the debate and inspire positive associations in the public imagination – without losing the critical eye central to so much human rights law •

DOS AND DON'TS



Switch your default setting from negative to positive – but leave your rose-coloured glasses at home.



Use your own words and the reality you know as the starting point.



Don't quote your opponent's words – even to pick them apart – unless unavoidable.

Why?

Human rights work can involve confronting the darkest aspects of humanity. But harping on the negative can be counter-productive because it makes people hopeless and frustrated about changing painful realities.

How?

Inspire people by giving them something to be hopeful about.

It's not about overlooking challenges or grey areas. In some situations, your critical viewpoint will be central to your credibility. Reality is full of success stories – find and emphasise them. Or give people a reason to get involved by sharing your vision of what future success would look like.

Sometimes you cannot avoid responding to ugly rhetoric and misinformation. Do so only within your own, convincing and more positive narrative or story. Arguing within your opponent's frame likely just reinforces their negative storyline.

So – analyse the narratives and stories used by human rights opponents. Then avoid them!

Food for thought

Some events may be so severe that you have to respond even without a prepared counter-frame. If this happens often, put time aside to reflect on your public communications infrastructure and preparedness.

Getting it right

→ The Bollywood-style music video **'The Welcome'** was made to promote the UN's Free & Equal campaign. Around 2.2 million people viewed it in its first year of release – it is the most watched UN video of all time.

Shortcuts

Solution-focused journalism can be a great inspiration. Read more about it in the section on Key 8.

Thomas Coombes' very comprehensive article **'Hope not fear: A new model for communicating human rights'** may shift your perspective.

Agreeing to disagree

For a counter-example of a campaign that brilliantly used scare tactics, see the UK's 'Don't Die of Ignorance' HIV information campaign. It helped dramatically turn the tide of rising homophobia in the 1980s.



“ Give your message an authentic voice ”

Choose the best messenger – such as a rights holder or a relatable public personality – to overcome public distrust of human rights ‘experts’, organisations and institutions. These people will speak in their own words directly to those who relate to them and in their language •

DOS AND DON'TS



Be respectful – don't make your messenger feel used or patronised by how you define their role.



Think locally – grass-roots level – to make both your messenger and your message most relevant.



Don't stand between the message and its potential emotional impact – remove yourself as a filter!

Why?

The public is wary of institutions, organisations and experts. You and those around you may trust your findings as reliable and welcome your messages. But assuming that the public feels the same way can keep you from communicating meaningfully with that audience.

How?

Choose a messenger whom people outside of your bubble will embrace – someone they can relate to and trust. This might be a midwife, an ex-policeman, a vlogger, or a celebrity. Let victims of rights violations, or human rights activists, speak for themselves where possible.

Build a community of relevant non-rights-based organisations or individuals – such as social media influencers or civil society organisations that provide direct support to vulnerable groups.

The general ('persuadable') public welcomes and trusts some rights holders more than others. Likewise, some spokespeople will come across as more authentic representatives of their group. Select with care!

Getting it right

→ In a campaign to stop child labour, the Glasnost ad agency, Hivos People Unlimited and the Municipality of The Hague cleverly used fresh voices to spread their message. Reaching out to Instagram influencers with over 100,000 followers, they grabbed the attention of both a young audience and the mainstream media.

Check out their [post-Campaign video](#) for the full story.

Food for thought

Changing mind-sets

Your leadership may not be thrilled to dilute a branding opportunity – but this is the price you may have to pay for authenticity. Empowered rights holders, not brand promotion, will be your sign of success.

- Find a balance between letting go of control and imposing quality checks. Direct your messenger or script specific communications, if necessary. Ideally, it will be enough to agree on frames to focus on – or negative ones to avoid.

- Link back to your organisation's efforts by encouraging your messenger to direct people towards more information or towards getting actively involved.

Shop talk

Be sure to set aside a part of your budget and your staff's time to support and develop unexpected new messengers when they pop up.



// Strengthen communication with media //

Establish and maintain strong, mutually beneficial relationships with all segments of journalism, including data, constructive and immersive journalism.

DOS AND DON'TS



Don't assume journalists will respect you as an authority because others do – scepticism comes with the profession.



Don't play the old-school vs. new-school game – both offer more than first meets the eye.



Don't make your communication a one-off release. Repeat your message over time.

Why?

Populists have done a good job encouraging negative media ‘spin’ on human rights issues. You need to counter with equally effective communications.

How?

Produce compelling content, use smart timing to release it, find the right media partners and strengthen those relationships.

Don’t be too cautious in selling stories to conventional media. They too can be interested in attention-grabbing, highly visual and emotive lead stories. When something goes viral on social media, they often report on it – just think of this year’s biggest Twitter hashtags. So small, digestible modules released over time may very well trigger more coverage.

Similarly, giving good TV and radio interviews means being smart but not highbrow. Use simple words and sentences, be informal, and use human anecdotes where you can.

That doesn’t mean giving up on substance. Some of the most innovative journalism is based on thorough research and can provide great avenues for communicating rights.

Time your communications in terms of real-world relevance and topicality. Let’s face it – your own outputs and their production schedule rarely matter to others.

Use anniversaries of instruments or institutional meetings only if big enough for the mainstream media to care. Days dedicated to certain themes can provide good hooks – don’t let these hit you by surprise.

Food for thought

It’s not easy to anticipate when an interested journalist will pop up. A quick exchange can discourage them from following up – or can prompt coverage you would have liked to avoid.

Train all your operational staff to interact with the media. At minimum, make sure they understand ‘framing’ and which frames your organisation does and does not want used for certain topics.

But dare to think beyond damage control – your staff can be great ‘multipliers’ of your main messages if they communicate clearly and engagingly.

Old school, new school

The ‘conventional media’ – newspapers, radio and TV – form a hugely diverse group. These include new, specialised outlets as well as old-timers trying new things.

Data journalists take raw data produced by researchers, analyse these themselves, and produce **news stories based on their conclusions**.

Immersive journalism **uses virtual reality presentation** to trigger more emotional, visceral responses.

Constructive (or solutions) journalism presents problems only alongside their possible solutions.

Don’t cynically dismiss it as good-news journalism! Check out the **Constructive Journalism Project** and **Positive News** for examples.

Shortcuts

Check out the **media coach’s website** for no-nonsense advice on getting it right on-air.



// Diversify communication strategies to address different audiences //

Find out how your audiences communicate and engage with them on those platforms •

DOS AND DON'TS

✓
Start with your catchiest visual or piece of the story.

✓
Be a tease – videos a few seconds long can draw people to longer material.

✓
Be aware of technical constraints – social media is about more than a way with words.

✓
Save articles and sub-sections of laws for the specialists. They make eyes glaze over.

✓
Be flexible – tweak your strategy as your project unfolds and target audiences and key messages crystallise.

Why?

So many channels, so little time. But to make the best use of the dizzying number of ways to spread your message, you need to adjust it to make it fit.

How?

Research the latest relevant data on user profiles of different media and various apps and platforms. Running a few questions on Google is better than nothing.

Exceptions surely exist, but age and geographic location are key. You are more likely to reach older and less urban members of the 'persuadable' public through newspapers, radio and TV.

In the digital sphere, split strong images and simplified stories into smaller bits. Be aware of technical realities. For example, visuals need to be optimised for the specific platform – such as small mobile phone screens. The extra effort can pay off: if your message goes viral on social media, traditional media may pick up the story.

One size does not fit all, but don't over-think. Aiming your communication at the general public is a good default – the media and most politicians are turned off by overly wonky texts, too.

In the rare case you truly do have a specialist audience – such as technical experts or civil servants – use a separate communication for them.

Tech time

Help your staff embrace new platforms by 'demystifying' the technology behind these. Hands-on training sessions can counter defensive reactions to the unfamiliar.

Getting in touch with your 'inner child'

If you want to communicate directly with children or young people, be clear about the exact age group. Consult specialists, such as those in developing human rights education for schools. Involving students in 'active learning' projects in their communities is more effective than simply sending out published teaching materials.

Don't forget that there are **organisations** out there working on this very issue.

UNICEF has put together some **helpful tips**.

Be inclusive

Making your communication accessible for people with disabilities broadens your audience in many ways. For example, captions added to your video help everyone viewing it in a public place, not just those with hearing impairments.

For more on maximising accessibility, see what the specialists say: **ENIL (the EU Network for Independent Living)**.

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Ensure sufficient resources for your communication work

Clearly define the time, human and financial resources needed to achieve your aims •

DOS AND DON'TS



Think beyond the usual suspects in-house – your most valuable human resources may be hiding in plain sight.



Allocate budget from the start.



Be flexible and responsive, gradually building up your resources as needed.

Why?

Great ideas are wonderful – but you need the skills, time and money to implement them.

How?

Most organisations still allocate far less than 10 % of project budgets to communications work. Around 25 % of either a core or project budget is more realistic to achieve impact.

Effective communication involves repetition. Make sure you have the budget and your staff has the time to communicate your work during a project's whole lifespan, not just in its final stage.

Be clear-eyed about your team's skills – and whether they have the time to use them. This may mean re-shuffling teams, providing targeted training, or hiring contractors for specific tasks.

Proactively gauging your staff's skills may uncover valuable resources in unexpected places. For example, your senior leadership may be your default public messenger – but other relatable staff members may better reach certain audiences.

Staff active on social media can be a 'budget-friendly' way to multiply your message. You may be fine with them adding their personal touch – but be sure they know when not to link to your organisation from their personal account, and what not to say. This may require an internal policy.

Talking translations

Conveying your message in multiple languages is vital for reaching broader audiences. But it's not just about having a budget for translations.

Straight translation may not be enough, especially for less formal texts. To avoid losing messages in translation, enlist local partners to take a look.

Don't forget the time factor. If you're hoping for media coverage: think in advance, and be realistic, about how long translation will take.

Open access

Making your communications accessible for people with disabilities can bring great benefits. It also might be required.

Take a few simple steps to get started and raise awareness amongst your staff. Add captions to videos, provide 'alternative text' on images, and make sure people know whom to contact for more information or to get involved.

To learn more, check out the work of organisations that focus on this area: [the EU Network for Independent Living, ENIL](#).

Shortcuts

Interacting with people online takes time and energy, and requires anticipating potential issues.

Reacting to negative comments can be especially tricky. For advice on how to deal with hostility, see CEJI's [online hate speech course](#).

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