

# WE CAN AND MUST BREAK OUT OF OUR ECHO CHAMBERS

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## The current ease of communication makes it even more important to get right

The last 10 years have seen a revolution in our ability to communicate with those outside our immediate circle. The advent of social media and new technology gives us the ability to broadcast our views and experiences in ways undreamed of a generation ago. This makes mass communication seem not just possible, but mandatory. At the same time, we are becoming increasingly aware of the ability to self-select, to weed out from our social media feeds those who disagree with us. This is narrowing down both our own exposure to ideas that are unfamiliar or uncomfortable, and our ability to communicate with those with whom we may have less in common.

As charities and active players for social change, we need to be able to reach beyond our inner circle of supporters. We need to find ways of communicating with those who may have different views and values to our own. Sometimes this means thinking afresh about our approach—and at times it feels challenging and uncomfortable.

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## Charities can use their prominence to amplify the voices of others

The Barrow Cadbury Trust is a social justice organisation, working in partnership with others to reduce structural inequalities. Guided by the Quaker imperative to ‘speak truth to power’, our approach is both to build an evidence base from which to argue for systems and structural change, and to enable the voices and views of those directly affected by structural inequalities to be heard by those in positions of influence. We fund a portfolio of work that ‘adds up to more than the sum of the parts’—in other words, we fund interconnected, complementary projects rather than a collection of stand-alone initiatives.

Incrementally over the years we have recognised that, in order to have influence, we need to increase and change the way we communicate. This is essential not only for the benefit of those who seek funding from us (our operating model is very different from that of many funders who have broad eligibility criteria and we have a duty to explain it). It is also key to increasing our impact. It is not enough to fund good work and expect it to yield meaningful results; we need to pay more attention to communicating who we are, what we do, and the findings from the work we fund. Accordingly, we set about streamlining our grant assessment and management processes, releasing resources to look at our communications work.

*‘We use our brand to amplify the voice of others, enabling the unfiltered voices of lived experience to influence those in power.’*

We developed a communications strategy, owned at board level, reflecting the importance of communications for our work. Our strategy and approach does not just address our areas of interest, but consciously reflects our approach of *‘using all of our assets, especially our money, to work with others to bring about structural change for a more just and equal society’*.

We are very aware of the power that a respected brand can bring, and the influence we have as an independent foundation. We therefore use our brand to amplify the voice of others—not just by retweeting, but by giving a platform to different voices. This includes enabling the unfiltered voices of people’s real lived experience to influence those in power. For example, that we ensure our blogs, not just our research, include the real voices of people at the sharp end of public policy. We ‘privilege the message over the messenger’—in other words, our name doesn’t always have to be given prominence, instead we identify the voice that will best be heard by the audience we seek to influence. Sometimes that will be us, at other times a civil society partner, or an individual with personal experience of the issue under discussion.

## **We must move beyond preaching to the converted**

Communicating who we are and what we do is relatively straightforward. A much greater challenge is presented when we want to reach beyond the echo chambers we all tend to create for ourselves on social and traditional media. This can be hard to do, and can be uncomfortable. It requires the forming of relationships and alliances with those who do not necessarily share our world view. And we need to shape our communications so that they can be received by those we seek to influence.

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An example that illustrates some of the successes and challenges of that is work around migration. The migration sector has been, for decades, rightly vocal about the rights and needs of migrants and refugees. Individuals and organisations have campaigned tirelessly and have achieved much, but their messages have frequently failed to land beyond those who are already supportive. The need to speak to different constituencies was graphically illustrated by an analysis of public attitudes towards migration carried out by Hope Not Hate in 2011<sup>1</sup>. This identified six ‘tribes’: Confident Multiculturalists, Mainstream Liberals, Identity Ambivalents, Cultural Integrationists, Latent Hostiles and Active Enmity. The first two, representing about a quarter of the population, are those who are strongly or in general supportive of migration. The middle two (around half the population), described by British Future as the ‘anxious middle’—people who are, in the case of the Identity Ambivalents, concerned about the impact of migration on their economic well-being and the social cohesion of their communities. Cultural Integrationists, meanwhile, are more exercised about the impact migrants may have on national culture. The final two groups are, as their classifications suggest, hostile to migration.

Rights-based campaign and messages that emphasise the benefits of migration to the settled population—the traditional lines of approach of many in the migration sector—are relatively comfortable territory for the Confident Multiculturalists and Mainstream Liberals. However, they do not resonate at all with those who feel that new arrivals are a threat to their economic or social well-being, or that they are a risk to treasured societal norms. Worse, badly framed rights-based messages can actually alienate those who are concerned about (but not necessarily opposed to) migration. *‘Telling someone that we are all richer [because migration has economic benefits], when they themselves are feeling poorer, is not going to win them over: a more likely reaction will be “bully for you—it’s still not working out for me”.*<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See: [www.fearandhope.org.uk/2011-report](http://www.fearandhope.org.uk/2011-report)

<sup>2</sup> British Future (2014) *How to talk about immigration*.

A new approach was needed, so Migration Exchange—a funder collaborative of which Barrow Cadbury is a part—established British Future, a think tank that looks at issues relating to identity and integration. The aim is to engage in conversation those who are anxious about cultural identification and economic opportunity, as well as those supportive of migration.

British Future has established that some approaches that instinctively feel right—such as myth-busting, where the migration advocate attempts to present statistics or facts about migration to sceptical audiences—are not helpful, or even neutral, but positively harmful. Bald facts fail to convince, and the hearer can feel patronised and further alienated.

A much more effective approach is to find common ground with conversations that connect with people who feel anxious about the impact of migration on their families, jobs and local area. This sounds obvious, but means that the rights-based language familiar to many in the social sector is ineffective. Instead, what has been shown to resonate with the ‘anxious middle’ are values-based approaches that emphasise reciprocity between new arrival and host nation—two thirds of the public are supportive of migrants who work hard, pay their taxes and learn English.<sup>3</sup> So a conversation that ‘frames’<sup>4</sup> migrants as people who want to pay their way and be active contributors to the society they live in will be much better received than one that emphasises their absolute rights.

## Reaching out beyond the usual suspects can be a challenge, but it is vital

Unsurprisingly, some in the migration sector have been uncomfortable with the suggestion that they might need to change how they communicate in order to reach new audiences. It is hard to acknowledge that an approach activists have been using for years may not be working, and, on a practical level, it’s difficult to develop a new way of engaging with less supportive members of the public. It takes support, and practice, but is an effective way of having a more positive and productive conversation with the anxious middle.

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Migration Exchange may seem like a special case, far removed from the day to day situation of most in the charitable and voluntary sector. The collaborative has resources at its disposal that its members can spend as they wish. For many in the sector, communicating beyond their immediate supporter base can seem too much of a luxury. But extending our communications is vital for the whole sector, not just campaigners.

To take just one example, it is abundantly clear that public trust in charity has taken a beating in the last couple of years. The sector can still rely on the strong support of some (the equivalent of Hope Not Hate’s Confident Multiculturalists and Mainstream Liberals) but we also have our ‘anxious middles’, uncertain of the benefits of charity, and our outright sceptics. If we are to maintain and increase public trust, we must find new ways to communicate our narrative. This requires identifying messages that work, and employing approaches that have been shown by others to be effective, even if we may not be entirely comfortable using them.

Learning from Migration Exchange, we can do the following:

- **Work in partnership with others**, pooling skills and resources around a complex communication issue.

<sup>3</sup> British Future (2014) *How to talk about immigration*.

<sup>4</sup> For an introduction to framing and values-based strategic communications, try Lakoff, G. (1990) *Don’t think of an elephant: Know your values and frame your debate*; or Crompton, T (2010), *Common cause: The case for working with our cultural values*.

- **Consider the role of communicating our messages in our theory of change.** In the case of Migration Exchange, developing a body of evidence around what messages work is just one strand. The theory of change also includes the creation and communication of a sound evidence base on the impact of migration and increasing the communications capacity of front-line migration organisations.
- **Research and test effective communications approaches.** Others may not have the same resources that were available to Migration Exchange, but all can think about the values and concerns of those they want to influence outside their immediate supporter base. But we can all do at least some informal testing of messages with less supportive family, acquaintances and others they fall into conversation with.
- **Encourage and support others to use the approaches that have been shown to be effective.**

As a sector, we need not only have social value, but also to communicate it. By developing clear communications strategies that tell the story of our work and our sector, we can be stronger and have more impact.

[This essay is part of a series on transformation from the boldest voices in the sector.](#)



### About the author

Debbie Pippard is Head of Programmes at the Barrow Cadbury Trust, where she oversees its work on migration, criminal justice and financial exclusion as well leading a number of strategic projects. She is also Chair of The Foundry, the award-winning human rights and social justice centre in Vauxhall and of Global Dialogue, an international human rights charity.

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