

**EQUALLY
OURS**

How to shift public attitudes on equality

A practical guide for
campaigners and
communicators



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Introduction

'Another world is not only possible,
she is on her way. On a quiet day,
I can hear her breathing.'

Arundhati Roy

What this guide is for

This guide aims to equip campaigners and communicators to change hearts and minds on equality. There's a growing body of evidence that we can move the needle on public attitudes if we understand what people really think and feel about an issue and why, and communicate by connecting with our most deeply held values, relating progressive causes to the things we care about most.

This guide applies a strategic communications approach to the challenge of showing inequality as structural – deeply embedded in our society and institutions, rather than the responsibility of individuals. It aims to shift thinking away from the belief that anyone can be a successful 'self-made person', and towards a recognition that there are still major structural barriers to equality. It is based on a six-month, qualitative and quantitative research project by ComRes for Equally Ours, which itself builds upon previous research for Equally Ours by YouGov.

We are grateful to the organisations that have contributed to the sector's existing body of knowledge on strategic communications. This guide draws on their research – see the Sources section for a full list.

Structural inequality

The challenge this guide seeks to address is how to make more of the British public understand inequality as structural – and therefore increase their support and advocacy for structural solutions. The research was designed so as to be applicable to multiple kinds of equality, such as along lines of race, ability or class, and we made sure to give a wide variety of examples in focus groups to reflect this.

This was our working definition of structural inequality, for the purposes of the research:

'Structural inequality is the idea that inequality is embedded across societal institutions, and that this maintains inequality between different groups of people. The way these institutions operate means some people always come off worse – and people who break out and succeed, despite their backgrounds, are the exception. This could be anything from the family, to the economy, to government and the media.'

For instance, the common practice of only offering customer service via phone call is a structural barrier to many deaf people, who may not be able to communicate on the phone.

A widespread failure to understand inequality in this way was identified as one of the biggest barriers to winning public support for more government action on equality. Our research aimed to convey that, in contrast:

- ▶ many people's life chances are unequal from the start
- ▶ some must work much, much harder than others to get to the same place
- ▶ as things stand some will never get there, however hard they try.

The 'conflicted' public

Many of us as campaigners end up talking mostly to people who already agree with us, or worrying about the opinions of those who forcefully disagree. That's not what this guide is for. It's designed instead to equip you to reach a segment of the British public – around 40% – that our own and others' research shows are conflicted about a range of social issues. Crucially, this audience are open to persuasion if we can connect with the compassionate values that they already hold.

As every campaigner knows, public attitudes matter because they influence policy, and that's especially true of this group, which includes a lot of swing voters – an audience that MPs and other decision-makers are especially keen to reach.

At the moment, this group overwhelmingly hears a narrative that emphasises personal responsibility for life outcomes (the 'self-made person') and ignores structural barriers – we see this from politicians, the media, advertising and popular culture. By identifying messages that successfully convey inequality as structural, and by repeating and reinforcing those messages, **progressive communicators can start to move the needle on public thinking around equality.**

Broadly speaking, this audience are:

- ▶ slightly older – they're above the age of 35, and represent an increasing percentage of the population as you go up the age brackets
- ▶ politically in line with the general population
- ▶ consumers of mainstream, not specialist, media.

Strategic communications

This guide takes a strategic communications approach to talking about equality. It's an evidence-based, values-led approach, using insights from cognitive science and testing assumptions to identify messages that can best shift public attitudes.

This approach is concerned with identifying and changing the **frames** through which we view the world. Frames are clusters of ideas, words, images and associations that we use, usually subconsciously, as mental shortcuts to make sense of the world around us. When you 'reframe', you are aiming to change the dominant frame through which your audience views a given issue.

For example, two competing frames around taxes are 'tax as a burden' and 'tax as building blocks'. If you most frequently think of taxes as a burden on taxpayers, you are likely to have very different views to someone who sees taxes as the building blocks underlying our society and public services.

Persuasive frames are often expressed through **metaphors** ('tax burden' and 'tax as building blocks' are both examples of this). Metaphors are incredibly powerful – they are highly visual, so they tend to stick in our memory. In the research underlying this guide, we developed and tested metaphors for structural equality, to identify which could successfully reframe equality in people's minds.

The challenge

The meritocracy myth

The belief that we live in a meritocracy, where anyone can be a 'self-made person', is incredibly pervasive among the target audience. **Our task is to provide an alternative to this narrative.**

We saw this story echoed a lot in our focus groups and survey work:

'If you really are willing to succeed and you have that determination and perseverance within yourself, then you can go as far as you want to.'

'If a person has the drive to succeed they will – however most people want the maximum return for the minimum of effort.'

We see it used by politicians:

'One of the things that is great about this country is that we're a meritocracy. Aspirational, hard-working people who want to come here – and who have the talent and skills to contribute to our economy and society – are very welcome.'

**- Home Secretary Priti Patel,
July 2019**

And echoed in the media:

'With budgets tight and people working hard to make ends meet, government losing £3billion of our money through overpayments of benefits is a real slap in the face for taxpayers.'

- The Sun, May 2019

And it crops up in popular culture and advertising all the time. This narrative is so well-established, and so accepted, that most people don't even notice or question it. But its impact on the public debate is regressive: if you believe that anyone who works hard enough has the same chance of success, regardless of their circumstances, why would you think the system needs changing?

Believing this narrative obscures the way that inequality really works in our society. And this in turn hinders public and political support for comprehensive, structural solutions to inequality.

How to spot the meritocracy myth

You can see this narrative in action in politics, in the media, in advertising, all the time. You might be seeing the meritocracy myth in action if you hear these words:

- ▶ 'hard-working people'
- ▶ 'deserving' and 'undeserving'
- ▶ 'scroungers' or 'skivers'
- ▶ 'cheating the system'
- ▶ 'jumping the queue'

Inequality is something that happens to other people

A common disconnect, and one that came up in our focus groups, was around personal experiences of inequality.

Though we know from our quantitative data that a large proportion (41%) of this audience has personally experienced inequality, our focus group participants tended to distance themselves from this, preferring to talk about examples of inequality relating to, for instance, someone they knew from work. In other words, they found it easier to acknowledge the inequality in experiences of others, revealing a cognitive bias towards talking about inequality as 'other'.

'There's nothing we can do about it'

A barrier to supporting action on equality, and indeed on all social issues, is fatalism – a belief that there's nothing we can do to change a situation. We saw this fatalism around inequality in our focus groups:

'I think I've kind of accepted it. I think there's things that can change, but inequality is part of life in the UK at the moment.'

Tackling fatalism is one of the key challenges strategic communications seeks to address, and one of the most common failings of traditional progressive communications.

'It'll get better by itself'

Many in our focus groups expressed a belief that the world is becoming more equal and, crucially, that this was a natural process that would continue over time, without any active intervention.

'There's so much more equality now than there was. I think that's probably the same with race as well. Is that it was probably much more limiting, even a decade ago.'

'I think that's how things have changed, whereas perhaps, like late '60s, early '70s, that sort of era, people used to look at the colour of your skin, where you were from, that sort of thing. I just think that has changed dramatically.'

This rosy view of things is a double-edged sword. The optimism can offer us a way in, and can be a counterweight to the fatalism we often see from this group. But the belief that things will get better by themselves often means underestimating the scale of the problem, and can undermine support for comprehensive solutions.

In practice: how to talk about equality

'If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.'

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Ten top takeaways

- 1 Take your audience away from the meritocracy myth.** The belief that we all 'get out what we put in' stops us addressing structural barriers to equality – your communications should provide an alternative narrative.
- 2 Use the escalator metaphor to explain structural inequality.** Describe an unequal society as one where some people have a mix of escalators in their path, while others have only down escalators, and have to run up them to get where they want to go.
- 3 Engage compassionate values like social justice, friendship and concern for others.** By repeatedly activating these values, we increase support for our causes. Use 'fairness' with care as it's often co-opted to reinforce the meritocracy myth.
- 4 Stay away from self-centred values like wealth and social status.** Avoid invoking these 'negative' values, even if they seem to help your cause in the short term – this will only suppress people's compassionate values and harm your cause in the long term.
- 5 Tell a different story instead of debunking opponents' claims.** Refuting or 'myth-busting' doesn't work and can even backfire, leaving people remembering the original claims, but not your debunking of them.
- 6 Link personal stories to societal structures, and always pair these with solutions.** Always be explicit about the structural problems behind your stories, and avoid fatalism by making it clear that we can credibly solve these problems.
- 7 Balance talk of structures with acknowledging agency.** Don't go too far in communicating structures – people instinctively disbelieve messages suggesting we have no control over our own fates.
- 8 Focus on the better world you want to create, and make it feel reachable.** Don't just talk about how to mitigate a problem – inspire people by reminding them of the better world we're striving for.
- 9 Expand the definition of 'us'.** Move away from 'us and them' narratives, and broaden who your audience think of as their community.
- 10 Find messengers who are authentic and credible.** Focus on messengers who can speak credibly about your issue and, if using celebrities, choose them with care!

Values first

In an age of Brexit, Donald Trump, and rising populism, it's becoming increasingly clear that the way many of us communicate isn't working. We rely too much on the **information deficit model of communication** – the idea that those who disagree with us only do so because they don't have all the facts.

Unfortunately, that's not how our brains work. Psychologists like Daniel Kahneman have shown how we take lots of logical shortcuts in how we think, and often respond with our emotions first, our intellect second. We instinctively question information that doesn't fit with our existing worldview.

To different extents, we all do this.

Values open the door

That's where values come in. Values are our most deeply held beliefs. Though it may be subconscious, values are how we make sense of the world. **We need to engage people's values first to open the door to our facts – and therefore our narratives – hitting home.**

Over decades social psychologists have mapped a number of human values that reoccur consistently across regions and cultures. We all have all of these values, and as campaigners we can activate or suppress specific values with our communications.

Values are like muscles, in that the more often a specific value is activated, the stronger it becomes in our minds. You don't have to name a value to activate it – talking about common behaviours or attitudes that exhibit a specific value can be a more relatable way to invoke it for your audience. For instance, the phrase 'we all deserve a second chance in life' brings to life the value of 'forgiveness'.

The Common Cause Foundation have done a lot of work around applying values research to progressive campaigning, and their handbook looks at this in greater depth.

Compassionate versus self-centred values

All values exist on a spectrum of compassionate (also known as 'intrinsic') to self-centred (known as 'extrinsic'). Here are some values that sit at the extremes:

Self-centred	Compassionate
Wealth	Equality
Social power	Forgiveness
Authority	Protecting the environment
Influential	Social justice
Preserving your public image	Honesty

When you activate people's compassionate values, you can increase their support for a whole host of progressive causes. And you can use those shared values in your campaigns to show how the problem you're aiming to solve runs counter to them.

Similarly when you activate people's self-centred values, you **decrease** their support for your cause, and tip their brain into thinking in a more self-centred way. That means that, even if appealing to one of the self-centred values might help your campaigns in the short-term, doing so will probably decrease support in the long-term. You're training your audience's brains to think in a self-centred, not compassionate, way.

Remembering that values are like muscles, and we can strengthen them by repeatedly activating them in people's minds, **it is crucial that we communicate to activate the compassionate values.**

What does this look like?

An example of what this **doesn't** look like is the Stern Review, a major government-commissioned report on climate change released under Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown. The report made the argument for tackling climate change by appealing to the self-centred value of wealth:

'Tackling climate change is the pro-growth strategy for the longer term, and it can be done in a way that does not cap the aspirations for growth of rich or poor countries. The earlier effective action is taken, the less costly it will be.'

An example of this done well is the Green Party's Brexit pledge, released in 2017. It engages our sense of community and cooperation, and frames these as the way forward for the country:

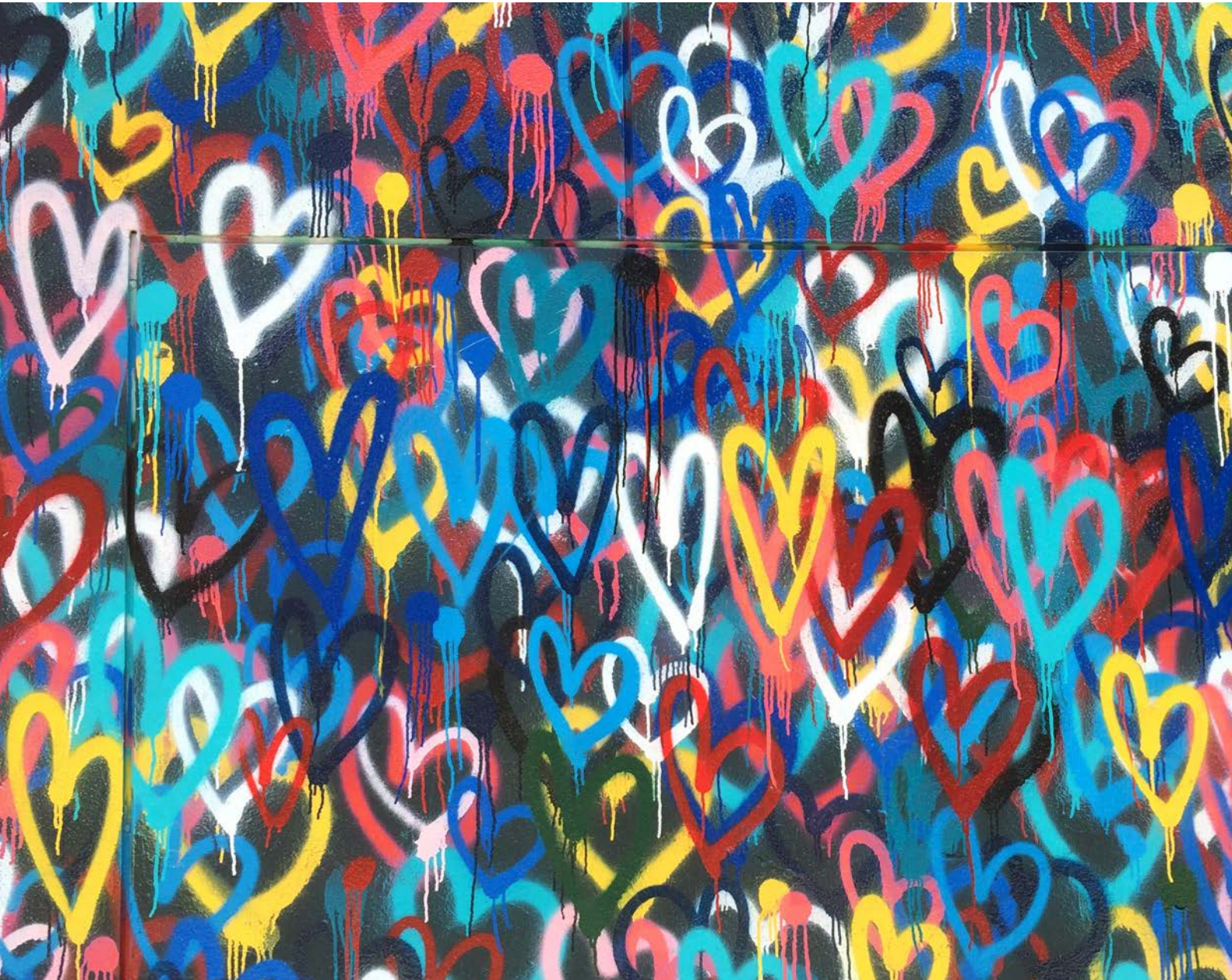
'The Green Party is united behind a bold vision for a fairer, greener, bigger future which has co-operation at its heart. From tackling climate change to preventing terrorism, the challenges of our times require us to work with our neighbours to find solutions.'

A note of caution

Some words can mean different things to different people, so we need to frame them well to make sure they're evoking the right values.

One of those words is **fairness**. We might think of fairness as a positive, compassionate value, but it can take people in a regressive direction. Our previous research showed that more than half of us believe fairness means 'getting what you deserve' – language that plays into the meritocracy myth. Only a quarter said that fairness was about equality.

This doesn't mean we can't use the word fairness, but we do need to frame it right – to communicate it in a way that's clear it's about equality, and avoids tapping into those more negative values.



Tell a different story

With many politicians and commentators out there telling an inaccurate story about how inequality works, it's common as campaigners and communicators to dissect their arguments in detail to point out why they're wrong.

Unfortunately, this can backfire badly.

By repeating our opponent's framing, we're giving them free publicity – leaving our audiences remembering the negative argument, but not our refutation of it. Worse still, the more a frame is repeated, the easier it is to call to mind in future. That means **even if we're repeating an opposing argument to 'myth-bust', we're only entrenching that argument in our audience's minds.**

The infamous claim by the Leave campaign that the UK sends £350 million a week to the EU was debunked many, many times. Despite this 4 in 10 Brits still believe it to be true. That's a lot of people who didn't respond well to myth busting!

Focus on your own arguments

We need to make our arguments without focusing on what we're against. When we describe a problem, we describe it in our own terms, with our own analysis of the causes and solutions. Crucially, we talk about it using our own language – never our opponent's!

When you negate an opponent's frame, you still bring that frame to top of mind. Think of the quote from President Richard Nixon, 'I am not a crook'. The word 'not' doesn't matter – it still makes us associate Nixon with the word 'crook'.

When we communicate, we have to focus on what we're for, not on our opponent's version of events.

What does this look like?

In the run-up to the 2017 general election, the Conservative Party announced a proposal around social care which would have required many older people to pay for care in their own homes, often forcing their families to sell their homes after their loved one's death to pay for it.

This was sold by the Conservatives as 'creating a sustainable future for social care', and much needed for the future of our economy. This could have provoked campaigners and opposition parties into endless debates on economics – a losing strategy both because refuting your opponents' arguments doesn't work, and because arguing about the economy engages the self-centred value of wealth.

Instead of engaging directly with these arguments and debating the economic merits, the Labour and Lib Dem parties branded the proposal a 'dementia tax' (a name by which the policy is still widely known), and both used this framing in their campaign materials and media appearances, calling the policy cruel and a disgrace.

The framing stuck, the policy proved extremely unpopular and the Conservatives quickly went back on the proposal.

It should be noted that, while 'dementia tax' is a good example of sticking to your arguments and being disciplined about your messaging, it still contains a strategic communications pitfall. Though, of course, no one should be taxed for having dementia, this phrase still plays into the 'tax as a burden' frame, subtly reinforcing the right's argument that tax is a negative, rather than a social good.

Stories, structures, solutions

Stories

Many of us use personal stories, or case studies, in our public communications. These can work really well to foster empathy, to bring a story to life. But to make our stories work to change hearts and minds, we need to pair them with two things: structures and solutions.

Structures

As this guide aims to address, it's absolutely crucial to communicate the **structures** underlying social problems. For instance, we often see sensationalised media coverage of particularly shocking incidents of violence against women. It's much less common to see discussion of the way widespread misogyny in society feeds and enables this violent behaviour.

Making this connection is especially important when using personal stories – if we don't frame our stories as part of a wider structural issue, they can often be seen as exceptional. It's easy to dismiss a case study alone as a one-off, an extreme and sensational case.

We need to frame our stories and be explicit about the causes behind them. The way we tell stories matters – research in the US found that people who watched news depicting poverty in individual terms, rather than as part

of a wider structural problem, were more than twice as likely to see poorer people as being responsible for their own poverty.

Just because a connection may seem obvious to us, it doesn't mean that our audience will make the same connection without prompting.

What does this look like?

In June 2019, former England footballer John Barnes was interviewed about racism in football in response to racist comments directed at Aberdeen defender Shay Logan. He responded by changing the conversation to focus on the societal racism underlying racist incidents on the pitch:

'Racism is a problem in society and as long as it goes on in society it will go on in all walks in life, of which football is one. Until we start to take responsibility as a society about racism rather than just looking it as a football problem, it will continue.'

'Before anyone is a racist football fan, they are a racist member of society who happens to be a football fan, not the other way around. While society says it is not our problem, it is football's problem, nothing will change.'

Caution! Don't ignore agency altogether

Though we need to show the structural causes behind our issues, it's important not to go too far in communicating this.

People believe really strongly in agency – that we get out what we put in, that our success in life is down to how hard we work. Messages that go too far in the other direction – that describe the problem as purely structural, with none of us having any control over our own futures – don't ring true, and are easy to dismiss. **The best messages on inequality combine an element of agency with a story of structural causes.**

Solutions

It's important to talk about structural causes in the right way. Often, when we talk about structures, we give the impression that they're fixed – that the world is naturally this way, and therefore can't be changed.

As outlined in the introduction, this is a major barrier to action on inequality – the 'there's nothing we can do about it' belief. This belief leads many to throw up their hands and conclude that there's no point in trying to make the world a better place. So **when we depict structures, we need to be very, very clear that they were created by people and can therefore be changed by people.**

Some ways of doing this include offering concrete solutions, talking about the people and policies that created the problem in the first place, and showing how other countries have made progress on the issue.

What does this look like?

The Framing the Economy partners (the Public Interest Research Centre (PIRC), New Economy Organisers Network (NEON) and the Frameworks Institute) tested this in their work to reframe the economy. They found that the public talked about the economy like it was the weather – a mysterious force over which we have no control.

The messaging that worked best to counteract this called for us to **reprogramme** the economy.

'We can reprogramme the economy so it works better. We can create a strong and durable economy by guaranteeing decent wages for the least well-off, investing in local communities, and restoring public ownership of common resources like energy and transport.'

'Creating a good society means taking back the password to the economy from corporate elites and reprogramming the economy so it runs smoothly and makes a good life possible for all users.'

Offer the chance to create a better world

One of the biggest and most common challenges in engaging the conflicted audience is a sense of fatalism. This audience, when asked, are concerned about many social issues, but they often feel that change is impossible, that there's no point trying to do anything about the world's problems.

99 problems

As communicators we often misunderstand where this inaction comes from, and assume that our audience just don't know how bad things are. In response, we ramp up the crisis language in the hope that people will feel moved to act.

But this relentless focusing on the problem often has the opposite effect – it causes people to bury their heads in the sand, and be more convinced than ever that this problem is too huge for us to ever solve. **In other words, it increases fatalism.**

Worse still, we often pair these dire warnings with small solutions, which don't ring true as credible ways to solve the problem – think 'donate just £5 a month'.

A common example of over-focusing on the problem is in communications around climate change – the vast

majority of people in the UK are convinced that it is a very real problem. But a much smaller number seriously engage in climate activism, or change their behaviour to minimise their carbon footprint.

Aspirational solutions

We need to shift our emphasis and focus a whole lot more on hope and solutions. But often when we do this, we **still** make it about the problem. Instead of focusing on the better world our solutions will create, we talk about fixing, mitigating, or reducing harms. That's not a goal to get out of bed for.

Instead of talking about mere reduction of harm we should, in the words of framing guru Anat Shenker-Osorio, offer the chance to create something good. **We must focus on the better world we want to create, and make it feel real, tangible, and above all achievable.**

In *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire*, author Arundhati Roy says 'Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.' The conflicted audience mostly don't believe this, yet. We must strive in our communications to convince them of it.

What does this look like?

Martin Luther King's iconic 'I have a dream' speech at the 1963 March on Washington does this incredibly well – he paints a vivid picture of a world that seemed, and in some ways still seems, unthinkable:

'I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

'I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

'I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

'I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today.'

Expand the definition of 'us'

The idea of community, and concern for others, is woven throughout our compassionate values – exactly the values that we want to be activating. By expanding who people think of as their community – in other words, by expanding who counts as 'us' – we prompt people to extend their sphere of concern.

Community

This audience respond really positively to the idea of community. We saw this in our own focus groups around communicating equality, and the same thing has cropped up in other organisations' research, including on housing and the economy. This is a great opportunity for campaigners, as community is central to our vision and the world we want to create.

For instance, in our own research people responded well to a metaphor that spoke of society as a fabric, our lives 'woven together with those of our neighbours and communities'. See the metaphors section for more on how this metaphor worked.

A broader 'us'

Broadening who this audience consider part of their community, in the loosest sense, is an opportunity.

The right-wing populists we see on the rise today understand that a wider 'us' helps progressive aims. Their aim is the opposite – to narrow the 'us' into a smaller and homogenous group, one that views outsiders with suspicion and enmity. Think of, for instance, Donald Trump calling journalists 'the enemy of the people' or Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro talking about activists as 'animals'.

In contrast, **our 'us' must be as diverse as possible** – celebrating difference as a strength that enriches all our lives. Some 'us vs them' frames are deeply embedded in our society, making them easy to activate in people's minds (eg. Leave vs Remain voters, millennials vs baby boomers). We must choose our words with care to avoid invoking these.

The exception: showing our opponents as outliers

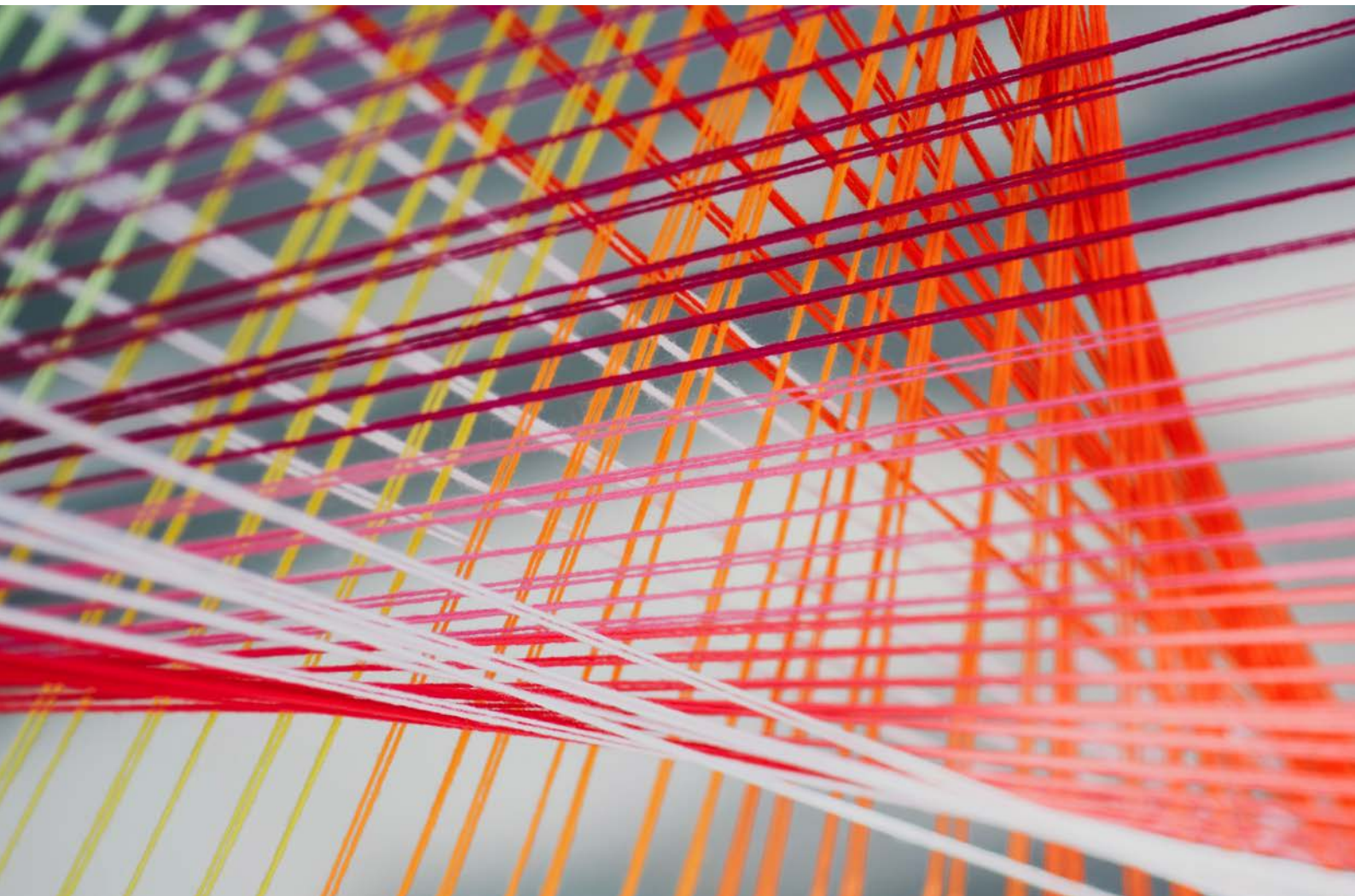
We don't broaden the 'us' out to include everyone. The injustices we see in the world have architects (such as self-interested politicians, unscrupulous bankers, hate groups) – part of our task is to isolate those people as outliers, and show how their actions are against all of our shared values.

What does this look like?

Jacinda Adern, Prime Minister of New Zealand, spoke in the wake of a religiously motivated mass shooting at two mosques in Christchurch. In her speech **she embraced those affected as unassailably part of New Zealand's social fabric**, and explicitly isolated the attacker as 'other':

'Many of those who will have been directly affected by this shooting may be migrants to New Zealand, they may even be refugees here. They have chosen to make New Zealand their home, and it is their home.'

'They are us. The person who has perpetuated this violence against us is not. They have no place in New Zealand.'



Effective metaphors for communicating equality

Why use metaphors?

Metaphors are highly visual, so they tend to stick in our memory. This is invaluable for campaigners when we want a shorthand way to communicate complicated subjects, or to encapsulate our frames and make them stay in our audience's minds.

Many charities and campaign groups make good use of metaphors. Eg. Age UK calling the decision to remove free TV licences for over-75s 'a car crash waiting to happen', or Shelter talking about housing benefit as a 'sticking plaster' on the broken housing market. If we can get people outside of those who already agree with us to use our metaphors, we can help popularise our way of seeing the world, and build public support for our issues.

These three metaphors were shown by our quantitative testing to successfully drive the belief that equality is structural:

The escalator metaphor

The following metaphor worked best, out of all those we tested, to drive the belief that inequality is structural:

'Living in an unequal society is like some of us riding up escalators to

get to where we want to go, while others of us often only have down escalators in our path, and have to run up them.'

Why it works

- ▶ It highlights how some people can rarely or never get to where they want in life however hard they try.
- ▶ It strongly visualises the sheer effort and struggle of overcoming structural barriers.
- ▶ Participants commented that this metaphor was an impactful and memorable image.

What does this look like?

Here's how a message using this metaphor might look:

'We all want to be able to make the most of our lives. But because our society is unequal, getting on in life can be like trying to run up a down escalator: however hard some people try, they're dragged back down. The systems and structures we've made over time – like the economy, education system and our laws – work for some people and not others. By designing these things differently, we can make a society that works for us all.'

The narrow tunnel metaphor

This metaphor worked joint-second best to shift views on equality in the right direction:

'The way society is designed at the moment is like someone built a narrow tunnel road through a mountain. We are all driving different size cars so, while some of us can pass through no problem, some of us have to go a long and winding way round to get where we want to go. We should seek to widen the tunnel so that we all have the opportunity to get to where we want to.'

Why it works

- ▶ Our focus groups felt that this metaphor was realistic, as it focuses on equal opportunity more than equal outcomes.
- ▶ It allows for people having different goals in life by framing the end point as 'where we want to go' instead of identifying a one-size-fits-all goal, e.g. financial success.

Some instinctively resisted the idea of 'widening the tunnel', and took this into a conversation about scarcity of resources (we also saw this resistance in other metaphors we tested). In practice, while we as campaigners must be calling for radical solutions, we need to tread carefully in how we convey these to this audience to avoid them throwing up barriers.

What does this look like?

Here's how a message using this metaphor might look:

'No matter how different we are, we all have dreams in life – but the way things are set up at the moment, not all of us can get where we want to go. It's like someone built a tunnel through a mountain that only some cars can fit through. Instead of some of us having to work much harder and take the long and winding way round to get where we want to, we should widen the tunnel – adapt our society so that it works for everybody.'

The fabric of society metaphor

This metaphor also worked joint-second best:

'Our lives are woven together with those of our neighbours and communities, but inequality is making the fabric of our society unravel. Instead of scrambling to mend each snag, we should identify why so many of us are struggling and strengthen the whole of society.'

Why it works

- ▶ Respondents liked the aspirational tone of this metaphor.
- ▶ Our focus groups responded well to the sense of togetherness and interconnectivity.

It's worth bearing in mind that, for some from parts of the country with higher levels of inequality, this metaphor didn't ring true, as they didn't see this sense of community reflected in the world around them.

What does this look like?

Here's how a message using this metaphor might look:

'We all care about our communities, and would be there to help out a friend or neighbour in need. But as the UK becomes more and more unequal, we're becoming disconnected from each other; the fabric of our society unravelling. Instead of only scrambling to react when a thread breaks – someone loses their home or falls on hard times – we must tackle the reasons so many of us are struggling up-front. We need to tackle rising inequality and strengthen the fabric of our society and communities.'

Handle metaphors with care

Not all metaphors are created equal. We might find a metaphor that describes our issue well, but that unintentionally plays into frames we want to get away from – hurting our cause in the long run.

For instance, a 2018 Guardian headline used the metaphor 'Migrants claim recruiters lured them into forced labour at top Qatar hotel'. The metaphor 'lured' is designed to bring to life the cruel practices of the recruitment agencies – but it is doing something else too.

By using the word 'lured' – a word most often used in relation to animals, or fish – it's playing into the dehumanising narrative pushed by the far right that casts migrants as sub-human. The language chosen is having an unintended, long-term consequence, even if in the short term it helps evoke sympathy and move readers to care about the issue.

Messengers

Your choice of messenger is vital, and can make all the difference between your message hitting home or being dismissed.

In our previous equality research, we tested a message around stop and search as delivered by different messengers. Support for action increased hugely when the message came from Nick Flynn, a black police officer who'd personally been stopped and searched over 30 times.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation found the most effective messengers on poverty to be bishops. And testing by BOND around international development messages found doctors, teachers and nurses working on the frontline were the best messengers.

The best way to identify the right messengers for your cause is, of course, to test it. If that's not possible, you should consider these things when choosing messengers:

▶ **Think carefully about what a celebrity is adding to your message.** Though their huge followings can be a great way to get reach, if a celebrity is seen as inauthentic, like they don't really know or care about your cause, they can undermine a progressive message.

▶ **Find credible messengers who can speak with authenticity.**

Those with lived experience of an issue often make really strong messengers – they have the closest knowledge of the cause at hand, and often naturally speak with passion about issues affecting their lives. This can include celebrities – for instance, Mind's partnership with Youtuber Zoella worked because she had previously been outspoken about her own battles with anxiety.

▶ **Combine warmth and competence.**

Testing by the Attitudes to Aid Tracker, based on research from the field of psychology, found that the best messengers were those combining warmth and competence. The groups that fit into this best were frontline workers, in particular nurses, doctors or teachers. Celebrities, by contrast, were often seen as warm but not felt to be competent.

What does this look like?

On Road Media's All About Trans project supports greater understanding between trans and non-binary people and media professionals, with an aim to foster more sensitive representation in the UK media. In 2014 they worked across

the country to engage regional media with young trans people, leading to media appearances including two young people in Dorset talking on Radio 4 about living as non-binary:

'When I was back in school I wasn't really understanding of it, of why I was so miserable at times, for most of the time I tried to act more manly, but it didn't work, just made me a bit more down. They weren't really open or accepting of [trans] issues.'

- Jesse, 18

'The first time someone calls you the right pronouns it's like 'yay, this is right, I like this!'

- Ollie, 12

Sources/Bibliography

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About Equally Ours

We believe that a good and strong society is a just and inclusive one. One where we are free from harm and can all contribute and flourish, whoever we are and whatever we do or don't have. A society that is equally ours.

Equally Ours brings together people and organisations working across equality, human rights and social justice to make a reality of these in everyone's lives. Through our members and networks, we join up research, policy and communications to shift public opinion and policy in positive and powerful ways.

Work with us

Through our practical and interactive workshops, we develop the knowledge, skills and confidence of campaigners and communicators to adopt a strategic communications approach in their work. So far, we've delivered Communications for Change training to over 250 civil society organisations. Our approach is collaborative and pragmatic – with a focus on outputs that can be put into practice.

We can offer bespoke training and consultancy to your organisation, including:

- ▶ support with developing campaign strategies and messages,
- ▶ advice on and support with audience insight research, value-based communications, and frame and message development and testing.

We can also run seminars or speak at your event.

Get in touch

Changing hearts and minds is a huge challenge when we have limited budgets and capacity. To find out more about how our strategic communications training and consultancy can help, get in touch at info@equallyours.org.uk or call us on 020 303 31454.