BRIDGES

Assessing the production and impact of migration narratives

NEW WAYS
OF TELLING
MIGRATION
NARRATIVES:
A TOOLKIT

Fundación porCausa

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Fundación porCausa is a foundation located in Madrid (Spain), staffed by journalists and social researchers. It aims to create a new framework for public discussions about migrations among citizens, policymakers and thought leaders. PorCausa seeks to shift the public conversation about migrations by feeding social discourse with messages and information that build an alternative narrative. A narrative that depicts human migration as a natural, inevitable, and largely beneficial reality; and favours migration policies that maximize benefits and address challenges related to migration.

PorCausa's work involves direct contact with different media outlets, organisations, institutions and political parties. Its partners include local administrations, such as the Madrid and Barcelona City Councils, and it has also cooperated with international institutions like the Overseas Institute. Por Causa works with relevant media, mainly in Spain (i.e. El País, Público.es, RTVE, Cadena SER and El Confidencial), and has strong links with universities and grass-root organisations providing assistance to migrant communities. The foundation has participated in several projects linked to the analysis of narratives by providing information and translating research results into dissemination products targeting the public at large.

1. Introduction: Why this toolkit?

In the Bridges project, we think that it is very important to elaborate a tool kit with some of the more efficient instruments to implement a new frame about migration. All the stakeholders have been working on this field for a long time, because of that we have used our experience to elaborate this document.

This tool kit is very useful for all those who have considered the importance of changing the predominant narrative around migration, but they find it difficult to put it into practice or transfer it to their work, their content or their daily lives.

2. Background

In 2016, the porCausa Foundation began to analyse the public discourse on migration. An analysis of audiences in Spain was carried out by conducting an opinion survey on the conscious and voluntary perception of migration. This survey was completed with an analysis of subconscious perception through an implicit association test (IAT) done with the University of Harvard. A large bibliography on migration discourses and audiences, mainly in Europe and the United States, was also retrieved.[1] This helped to define a new paradigm of communication with new ways of transmitting knowledge that can be consumed by different audiences. Taking the capacity of audiences to receive and absorb information as a starting point, on the basis of previous studies mainly supported by anthropological and sociological analyses, this toolkit proposes a series of rules to build discourses on migration that can prevail in the public debate.

To this aim, it is necessary to consider the deep sadness, loneliness and fatigue caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. European societies are already full of fears derived from a narrative that began to take shape as a result of 9-11 and was reinforced during the 2008 crisis. This generated a detachment from information which resulted in a new way of telling reality.[2] Hatred of a third person joined forces while the most humanist options became reactionary. And within this framework, the arrival of pandemic has shown that our individualistic model can only lead us to unbearable solitude at this time.[3]

3. The audiences

Who are the mainstream audiences? According to a classification that has historically been used in political communication and electoral campaign design, the audiences are divided into three main groups: the voters or lovers, the opponents or haters and the undecided or ambivalent.

The voters or lovers are those people who have bought the message of discourse on migration; if we were a political party they would constitute our base, the affiliates. In the case of the migration narrative, this group is made up of people who do not question human rights and understand that migration is just another right. We already have this group with us and, if they were our political base, we would take care of them. But beware, they are not our target audience as they are already convinced; they will vote for us, whatever we do.

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1.   See for instance 'Nuevas narrativas migratorias para reemplazar el discurso del odio'. Fundación porCausa 2019. https://porcausa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Dossier_Nuevas-Narrativas-para-reemplazar-el-discurso-del-odio.pdf

2.   See 'Narrativas migratorias del amor.' Fundación porCausa 2021. https://porcausa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/narrativas-migratorias-del-amor-de-la-solidaridad-a-la-comunidad-porcausa.pdf

3.   See 'Narrativas migratorias del amor.' Fundación porCausa 2021. https://porcausa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/narrativas-migratorias-del-amor-de-la-solidaridad-a-la-comunidad-porcausa.pdf

Opponents or haters are those people who, if we were a political party, would be affiliated to another party, without any possibility of changing their vote. Under no circumstances will this group understand that migration is an inherent human right. No matter what arguments we present to them, their opinion is formed and is far removed from ours. No matter what we do, they will never change their minds. There is no possible argument to convince them that migration is an inherent human right and, of course, there are several human rights that they reject and they would gladly opt out of several of the conventions we are currently in.

The undecided or ambivalent audience is composed of people who do not have a clear stance or opinion towards a certain topic. They are afraid, they don't like the world they see, they wish no one ill but they need solutions that never come. They understand that Human Rights are important but the rights of others should end where their own begin, and at that point they are lost. They are tired of being told what to think, or of feeling judged for not having a clear position on rights. They understand that there is a lot of suffering in the world but they do not have a clear idea of what to do. They may sympathise with the discourse of charity, helping others, whom they perceive as different from themselves. This is our target audience because it is a group that with the right arguments can come very close to the position of the lovers, while in situations of social tension they will come closer to the position of the haters. This group will be lovers in a crisis such as the one provoked by the photo of Aylan Kurdi and will be haters if there is an attack on Western soil.

It is very difficult to estimate how audiences are really composed in relation to migration in Europe. Positions are not clear and there is a lot of confusion. For this reason, it is impossible to evaluate the composition of the audiences using quantitative surveys; it is essential to conduct personal interviews and carry out extensive qualitative analyses. However, from porCausa, after analysing different surveys and works[4], we work with the following hypothesis: in 2016, lovers represented 35%-40% of the population, undecided were 33%-40% and haters 18%-25%. Four years later, the number of lovers decreased by 20%-25%, while undecided rose to 60% or more, and haters stood at around 25%.

The existing analyses show we are losing sympathetic audiences who are becoming undecided while the haters have consolidated in their highest rank. This situation corresponds to most European countries with special attention to France, Greece, Germany and Italy[5]. In 2016, a study carried out by France 24 Observes identified 162 cases of fake news disseminated on social networks, in articles or even in statements by politicians, where the most common themes were criminal acts allegedly committed by migrants (in 30% of the occasions), on social benefits claimed by migrants (20%) and with the idea of a migratory invasion (in 19% of cases).[6]

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4. See 'Actitudes hacia la inmigración'. CIS 2014, 2016, 2017. http://www.cis.es/cis/opencm/ES/1_encuestas/estudios/lista-Tematico.jsp?tema=82; 'La inmigración, el 'problema' que más crece en el CIS (y que está sobrestimado).' El Confidencial 02/08/2018, https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2018-08-02/inmigracion-cis-problema-percepcion_1600693/; 'Understanding public attitudes towards refugees and migrants.' Overseas Development Institute 2017. https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/11600.pdf; 'Postelectoral elecciones generales.' CIS 2016. http://www.cis.es/cis/export/sites/default/-Archivos/Marginales/3140_3159/3145/es3145mar.pdf; 'Informes de análisis preelectoral y post-electoral en España desde 2016.' CIS http://www.cis.es/cis/opencm/ES/1_encuestas/TiposEncuestas/EncuestasElectorales/encuestaselectorales.jsp; Ref. Informes de Funcas http://www.funcas.es/; Eurobarómetros desde 2014 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/es/be-heard/eurobarometer; 'Análisis de percepción.' More in Common https://www.moreincommon.com/our-work/publications/; 'Finding France: A people in search of their country.' More in Common 2020, https://www.moreincommon.com/media/tvhd4quv/la-france-en-que-te-rapport.pdf; 'Speaking to Core Beliefs in Immigration.' More in Common 2019 https://www.moreincommon.com/media/qdwpkoux/pdf.pdf; 'Fault Lines: Germany's Invisible Divides.' More in Common 2019 https://www.moreincommon.com/media/0wih2zdp/more-in-common_fault-lines_executive-summary.pdf; 'Attitudes towards National Identity, Inmigration and Refugees in Greece.' More in Common 2019.
5. See 'Nuevas narrativas migratorias para reemplazar el discurso del odio.' Fundación porCausa 2019. https://porcausa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Dossier_Nuevas-Narrativas-para-reemplazar-el-discurso-del-odio.pdf and related sources found in the 2019 studies on perception by the Overseas Development Institute and the 2018-2019 perception pools delivered by More in Commons.
6. See 'How fake images spread racist stereotypes about migrants across the globe.' The Observers France 24 2018. https://observers.france24.com/en/20180105-fake-images-racist-stereotypes-migrants

The shaping of an anti-immigration common sense has increased considerably in the last years, especially since the rise of the far right across all Europe. To communicate effectively, audiences must be listened. But, at the same time, you must consider the state of fear and confusion in which they find themselves. The new narratives unite ambivalent audiences with the migration narrative.

4. How to construct a new migration narrative

Here we present the rules designed to build a migration narrative that fits the new communication model.

The concept of a new narrative implies, first and foremost, establishing a new framework for debate: an original perspective from which to approach migration that does not refer to the principles on which the usual debate is based. In order to generate these issues, we offer two fundamental tools that take us away from the imposed clichés: avoiding the us/them dichotomy in order to generate a universal discourse on migration; and handling emotional rhetoric that is not articulated in data in order to arouse empathy.

4.1 Establishing a new framework

The primary rule for creating an alternative narrative is to succeed in establishing a new narrative framework that does not react in any way to the current tenets of the migration debate.

Currently in the migration debate, the narrative frameworks have been imposed on the public discussion. The perspective and principles of the public debate have been defined through the narratives that circulate in the media and other platforms and have thus established the way most of the audiences think, feel and perceive the reality of migration.

A narrative framework is understood as the lenses through which a part of reality is perceived and interpreted[7]. Once these structures of thought are in place, we perceive reality in such a way that it fits into them. The frame designates the boundaries around a subject and establishes the mechanisms that will define its perception. Metaphorically, they can be understood as the frames of a picture: they tell us what to pay attention to, what is inside, what is not, and how we should read it.

Understanding love as something brotherly, love narratives are the new framework where love unites people for the creation of something, material or immaterial. We also believe that, as Bell Hooks defends, love is a voluntary act, it's an interaction but also an action. It's never simply a feeling or an emotion but an active verb. Love is the set of processes, those relationships, those dynamics that build, create, offer alternatives and encourage reimagining. Love provides the space to redefine our most internalised conventions, break with a balance and open horizons to changes and new realities. In this sense, love is not spontaneous or passive, but is a vital political act for democratic practices, a tool for change and union that appeals for public freedom within diversity and collective difference.[8]

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7. Bateson, G. 'A theory of play and fantasy', in Chihu Amparán, A, *Los marcos de la experiencia*, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Iztapalapa, 2017. Available at: https://bit.ly/2VNxTcp
8. See 'Narrativas migratorias del amor.' Fundación porCausa 2021. https://porcausa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/narrativas-migratorias-del-amor-de-la-solidaridad-a-la-comunidad-porcausa.pdf

Two considerations:

1. Talking about the causes of migration is not a good alternative
   Causes of migration are usually approached from a rational perspective that sees the migrant as a passive subject driven by the economic or material circumstances that surround him/her. Variables such as desires and aspirations for the future, personality or the existence of family and support networks are rarely taken into account. It may be that in a narrative where migration can be alleviated or even stopped, it is necessary to understand the causes. It is also likely that the causes function as legitimisers of a movement that, because it is understood to be unnatural, needs to be justified.

2. To base migration narratives on the discourse of rights is not a solution
   Media and NGOs are clear about that: audiences are falling, but there are many reasons for this. Among them, we highlight that it is common that when we talk about rights it is about their violation. Rights end up being linked to negative issues, to pain, suffering and inequality... It is identified with the terrain of denouncing what is not right. And this terrain, in the current context of crisis and insecurity, is not appealing, it produces fatigue and brings concerns that undecided audiences increasingly prefer to avoid. In this sense, media and NGOs are warning that the discourse of rights (as it has been presented so far) seems to have a decreased impact on mainstream audiences. As for the migration narrative, the discourse of rights does not add but subtracts. Although rights must be defended tooth and nail, focusing the narrative just on rights does not seem to benefit the struggle to defend them.

4.2 Avoiding the Us - Them

The second rule for establishing a new narrative framework is to articulate our migration rhetoric in universal terms without distinguishing between us and them when talking about mobility.

Migration is a universal phenomenon, inherent to the human condition. All people in some way are, were and will be migrants. However, migration rhetoric, far from taking this fact into account, reinforces an idea that is now firmly established: that migration is a foreign issue that only affects others, the migrants, who under no circumstances can be us. This polarisation responds to a tendency to reduce reality in order to understand it: it is common to simplify what we do not know. In the case of human groups that are foreign to us, "the others", we construct stereotypes that homogenise them. Compared to them, "we" consider ourselves to be infinitely more diverse and complex. While this tendency to simplify has always existed, in the new communication paradigm in which we find ourselves, and particularly in hate speech, it has become a particularly powerful tool.

4.3 Sentiment versus data

The third rule is the use of a fundamentally emotional rhetoric, without data being the narrative axis.

From pro-immigration positions, it is common to try to combat demagogic speeches that, instead of relying on solid arguments, are purely emotional, with data. This technique, however, may not always be effective, since data may not counteract perceptions nor sentiments, and is difficult to remember. In contrast, it is the more emotional speeches that really stick.

This doesn't imply that data is not necessary. Let us remember that what we are proposing here are strategies for narrative change to reach a mainstream audience. In the construction of knowledge, as well as in the definition of policies, it is essential to use solid and justified arguments that do justice to the reality of the phenomenon we are dealing with. However, as soon as we change the terrain and our objective is to communicate, these instruments may not be so useful.

4.4 Three additional considerations

The substitute narrative

We don't want to win a war. We want to avoid it.

In the face of a climate of aggression and polarisation, it is essential to establish narratives that bring us closer to our target audiences through understanding and empathy. We need to recognise that, however unfounded fears and insecurities about migration may be, they are legitimate.

In order to conquer narrative spaces, we must first achieve the favourable predisposition of the recipients of the information through a dialogue in which all parties feel heard. Various studies[9] show that a proportion of people who have no clear favourable or unfavourable feelings about migration have felt ignored, disregarded, ridiculed and dismissed by discourses that define migration as a fundamental right.

Local focus

Discourses are more easily apprehended if they allude to a local environment, to spaces that are close and recognisable. Rhetoric that proposes to change the world, to change the system or that offers geographically distant examples is unlikely to arouse emotions in the long term. A polar bear in its bones on a block of ice thawing in the Arctic may strike us at first, but the possibilities of influencing it are so remote that we will probably throw in the towel. Examples so far removed from our everyday lives are quickly forgotten: they seem to share very little with our lives and, even though they are closely related to us, they put a desert between such realities and our own. Images and news of distant wars or abstract slogans will have little impact on our long-term involvement.

Thinking about narrative change from a local approach means thinking of ourselves as agents of change, with the capacity to transform our environment. When we have a shared, nearby space, it becomes our and everyone's responsibility. On the contrary, impotence in the face of large and distant events leads us to derive responsibilities. And in turn, the non-recognition of such events is met with our insensitivity. As Kume Appiah recounted, a person might be momentarily horrified at the news of the destruction of all the inhabitants of China by an earthquake, but would sleep peacefully that night. Conversely, he could not sleep a wink knowing that the next day his finger would be cut off.

Dressing up information

To succeed in implementing a new narrative, we need to dress it up so that it becomes irresistible. It is essential to have the support of creatives, marketing experts and young, innovative people who can transform slogans designed according to the premises of this guide into something very attractive.

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9. See 'Nuevas narrativas migratorias para reemplazar el discurso del odio.' Fundación porCausa 2019. https://porcausa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Dossier_Nuevas-Narrativas-para-reemplazar-el-discurso-del-odio.pdf and studies on perceptions by the Overseas Development Institute.

4.5 Success stories

A successful campaign: ON THE RIGHT SIDE OF HISTORY
https://dallapartegiustadellastoria.it/

In Italy more than one million people born to foreign parents, raised and active in the Italian social fabric, live without formal recognition of their belonging to the Italian state. In order to stand up for one's rights as a woman, worker/worker, youth, LGBTQA+ community, and so on, one must first be recognized as a citizen and citizen and exercise the power to translate dissent into a vote. Foreign-born citizens, while experiencing these intersections, do not influence the political agenda because they can choose their own representation and make their voices count. We choose to mobilize once again for the rights of all and sundry. We choose to stand on the right side of history and raise awareness of the urgency of this reform; we want to bring politics to the table without putting personal needs and non-factual data first.

The Campaign started in 2020: they wanted to change the Italian citizenship law. The process was:

1. They studied other campaigns in the 60s and extracted success tips. They linked campaigns of the past with the current campaign: "They were campaigns in the past that you agreed, such as all citizens should have the same rights. It is so you are already on this campaign."
2. They tricked the algorithm by introducing cross-cutting themes to what they wanted to achieve e.g. talking about church things, or women's rights.
3. They went from campaigning to lobbying
4. They created challenges on instagram and tiktok and flashmobs
5. They created a regular information system for opinion leaders
6. Then they worked with 3 types of audiences and organised a campaign with target audiences (for, ambivalent, against)

The big success was when they made a viral video asking for marriage with 600.000 views that is still growing.

A successful network: Esenciales under the leadership of RegularizaciónYa
https://esenciales.info/

RegularizaciónYa is a movement led by migrant and racialised people who in the context of the pandemic in 2020 joined to claim for the regularisation of all undocumented migrants living in Spain. They first presented a letter to the government and then a motion (*proposición no de ley*) which was debated at the national Parliament, however without much success. In December 2021 RegularizaciónYa was invited to join a network with 5 other organisations called Esenciales to work on a Popular Legislative Initiative for the same purpose. This network launched a large campaign using the resources of these 6 organisations under the legitimate leadership of RegularizaciónYa and the support of more than 800 organisations from all fields and political spectrums to get half a million signatures. This network has become the largest collaborative mobilisation to claim for the regularisation of undocumented migrants in the history of Spain.

The process was:

1. Creation of a representative group of migrant people within the movement of RegularizaciónYa and generation of legitimacy.
2. Creation of a diverse advocacy group.
3. Identification of a concrete vector for action: gathering of more than half a million signatures to request a Popular Legislative Initiative debated in the national Parliament.

4. Development of a common communication strategy composed of specific communication actions for different social sectors, including wide-ranging messages ranging from human rights to the economic effects of irregularity.
5. Combination of a large online communication campaign with street events to collect signatures.

In December 2022, RegularizaciónYa achieved its goal to collect more than 500,000 signatures.

4.6 Inspiring works

A way of creating a story through strategic litigation: STOP MARE MORTUM
https://stopmaremortum.org/

Stop Mare Mortum is an all-volunteer citizens' platform. Its aim is to advocate for changes in migration policies based on human rights. Among several advocacy activities, strategic litigation has been a core strategy to achieve such changes, becoming one of the leading organisations in Europe in strategic litigation on migration issues. Strategic litigation involves choosing a case that is highly symbolic that may set a legal precedent for other related legal claims and generate a narrative of success. This narrative of success allows, in turn, to create campaigns based on the precedent created, counter misinformation, and inspire migrants on the path of fighting for their rights.

Creating a diverse and solid network: Io Accolgo Campaign
https://www.manifestosardo.org/a-cagliari-parte-la-campagna-io-accolgo/

This organisation has developed a very big network based on the diversity of the participants that go from usual progressive civil society to also trade unions or catholic organisations.

Their work is based on finding issues that bring together a large social consensus in order to generate inspiring social mobilisations through positive values. With this strategy they have been able to restore hope to a society that was discouraged by recovering the strength of street activism.

A decentralised network of local organisation to go global: Seebrücke (Seabridge)
http://www.seebruecke.org

It started as a campaign to call for safe harbours during the refugee death crisis in the Mediterranean and has grown into a huge network of more than 180 participating local organisations mainly located in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. They use a guerrilla warfare system of organisation where through a single claim several organisations carry out independent actions. Seebrücke ensures the union of the whole by providing support to organising such actions, a platform for exchange and visibility, a legal framework, branded materials in orange (logos, stickers, buttons, posters) and flyers.

Changing Media to get migrants in the Media supports: Netzwerk.Medienvielfalt (network media diversity)
https://medienvielfalt.net/ https://colourfulvoices.net/

This project is an interesting mix between a support organisation and a network for help and exchange of experiences. Created by media creators with a migrant or refugee background, this organisation connects refugee and migrant media projects and creates independent radio stations throughout Germany. It also provides organisational, technical and financial support to like-minded media and journalists.

BRIDGES: Assessing the production and impact of migration narratives is a project funded by the EU H2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation and implemented by a consortium of 12 institutions from all over Europe. The project aims to understand the causes and consequences of migration narratives in a context of increasing politicisation and polarisation around these issues by focusing on six European countries: France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom. To do so, BRIDGES adopts an interdisciplinary and co-productive approach and is implemented by a diverse consortium formed by universities, think tanks and research centres, cultural associations, and civil society organisations.

The BRIDGES Toolkit provides a set of guidelines for civil society organisations on how to build alternative narratives on migration. The toolkit is based on the experiences of several initiatives analysed as part of the project's research efforts on how civil society can promote innovative strategies against exclusionary discourses on migration and integration.