# Messages that build support for transgender rights

A toolkit for effective communications strategies

TGEU

# Messages that build support for transgender rights:
## A toolkit for effective communications strategies

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TGEU is a member-based organisation working to strengthen the rights and wellbeing of trans people in Europe and Central Asia.

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# INTRODUCTION

Most people are not aware of trans people and lack any reference points to understand the lives and challenges that trans people experience. 2-29% of the general public knows someone who is trans, versus up to 82% knowing someone gay, lesbian, or bisexual.[1] In the absence of accurate information and representation, anti-trans actors target these audiences with misinformation. Many of these anti-gender and anti-trans organisations rely on complex communications strategies to improve their reach and messaging. While there are concerted efforts to counter this, there is a knowledge gap on how to effectively respond. In light of this growing issue across Europe and Central Asia, TGEU researched communication approaches to develop a concrete guide to build support for trans rights.

There is a wealth of research on how to draw the general population towards trans people. However, there is less work on how to not push them away by recognising that usual activist language can alienate those we want to connect with. TGEU is interested in understanding how to talk to the group of people who constitute persuadable audiences, or the 'moveable middle', in particular. This audience presents the greatest opportunity to increase empathy for and connection to trans people. But, communications with this audience need to balance the need to make issues accessible while also recognising the complexity and diversity of trans people, and respecting their dignity. The moveable middle represents not just members of the public, but could also include allies, policy-makers, family members, and all those we want to work with to protect trans rights.

This research is to support member organisations in reaching these audiences while protecting them from the rhetoric of fear which anti-trans actors use so effectively. This toolkit therefore analyses available research and practice on effective communications to influence social change. Its purpose is to identify communication frames, messages, and strategies from existing research to help trans groups and activists build empathy and support for trans people and trans rights. It also suggests messaging and communication framing, and recommends next steps. These approaches should be useful for anyone communicating with these audiences. They can be used for traditional communications, or adapted to advocacy, campaigns, and direct conversations.

TGEU's analysis is based on interviews and resources from organisations who have conducted communications research and/or social change communications campaigns: *Heartwired*, *Transgender Law Centre*, *Wonder: Strategies for Good*, *Goodwin Simon Strategic Research*, *Movement Advancement Project*, *All About Trans*, *AVERT*, and *ILGA-Europe*, among others.

This toolkit is structured in three parts. The first part is a toolkit on strategic communications. It includes the rationale for focusing on the moveable middle, some broad principles on

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[1] European Commission. (2019) Special Eurobarometer 493 Report: Discrimination in the European Union. European Commission. Available at: *europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2251*. The survey asked "Do you have a friend or acquaintance who is trans?". Results are summarised in the report.

communicating for change, and the process of using research to develop and test effective messages targeted to your audience. This section is helpful to boost strategic communications skills and provides practical tools and guidance.

In the second part, we present two different research projects which explore effective communicate on trans rights: the **Heartwired approach** and the **Race Class Gender Narrative**. This section gives step-by-step examples of building messages based on evidence and relying on tested language.

The third and final part focuses on case studies of two successful campaigns carried out in the recent past. The first is from the Czech Republic, and the second from Ireland. Their communication approaches are highlighted to provide insight into what worked. They are also useful for internal training around strategic communications and narrative change.

Based on evidence and the knowledge of your audience, different methods might be effective. This toolkit is not  prescriptive – it does not tell you that this is how you must communicate, but offers insight into what the research shows, and the pros and cons when using these strategies. We hope that these communications approaches and principles will add to your toolbox for countering anti-trans voices.

# TOOLKIT ON STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

## 1. Why the moveable middle?

There are some common tactics to respond to anti-trans narratives. The first are **counter narratives**. These are short and direct reactions that discredit or de-construct opponents' messages. They often confront the narratives by offering counter arguments and facts. They aim to reach audiences who sympathise with negative views that might be populist, nationalist, racist, or homophobic.

A second approach is to use **alternative narratives**. These aim to take up space by putting forward alternative positions in public discourse. Alternative narratives strengthen positive, inclusive, and constructive ideas. They focus on what we stand for, rather than what we are against. They do not challenge negative narratives directly, but try to undermine them by changing the frame of discussion. They aim to reach the whole population.[2]

### TYPES OF NARRATIVES

Opposition argument:
*'The existence of transgender people is a new phenomenon; it is a fashion.'*

Counter narrative:
*'Transgender people are not a phenomenon, but human individuals like you and me. Transgender people have existed in all times and cultures.'*

Alternative narrative:
*'The general public is becoming more aware of the existence of transgender people and what being transgender means. With more visibility and positive representation of transgender people, society overall becomes more aware of how everyone can change to make the lives of transgender people safer.'*

The approaches presented in this toolkit take a different track from the two options above and target the audience who constitute the 'moveable middle'. They are similar to the alternative narratives approach in that they focus on positive, inclusive ideas. But, instead of reaching the

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[2] Council of Europe. (n.d.), Develop tool - Step-by-step guide to human rights based narratives, Develop tool., Council of Europe. Available at: *pjp-eu. coe.int/en/web/human-rights-speech/develop*.

whole population, they focus on narratives that will be heard by a specific set of people who are neither strongly for, nor against, trans rights.

## WHO IS THE 'MOVEABLE MIDDLE'?

The 'conflicted' or 'moveable' middle are people who hold conflicting views about an issue or who do not have strong views in either direction. Their fears and concerns are often activated by opponents' messaging, which can cause them to switch from progressive to regressive positions and lose access to the values that motivate them to support trans people.

The moveable middle are people who might not be informed about trans people and do not have any reference points. They have no strong opinion about trans people in either direction and are the most persuadable. This means they are more likely to be sympathetic to trans issues. But, they are also at risk of being persuaded by anti-trans narratives.

## WHY FOCUS ON THIS GROUP?

People in the moveable middle might hold views that we perceive as upsetting or offensive. But these views are not strong, and can easily change. This makes it important not to write off these people. They also represent the majority of the general public (83% in some contexts) and a large potential audience to nudge towards broader societal support for trans rights. If we communicate consistently in a way that activates more progressive views and values, we can shift them to hold these views more concretely. The aim is to move people along a spectrum of emotional reactions, from deep antagonism towards tolerance, from tolerance towards celebration.

## WHY NOT FOCUS ON FIGHTING ANTI-TRANS VOICES?

We know from experience that constantly countering anti-trans narratives takes up time and resources. Ultimately, this distracts from where we can make more significant changes – a tactic used increasingly for this explicit purpose. Engaging anti-trans actors also contributes to greater visibility of their efforts.



*Photo by Foto Sushi on Unsplash. Middle-aged fathers can belong to the moveable middle.*



*Photo by microgen on Canva. Politicians represent some of the moveable middle audience.*



*Photo by Mick De Paola on Unsplash. People in the LGBT community can also be in the moveable middle when it comes trans rights.*

# 2. Effective communication

It is essential to understand the emotional dynamics at work in an opposition environment. It is not effective to respond to opponents' falsehoods with factual counter arguments. This does not work and wastes energy. Rather, the real opposition to focus on is the fear and anxiety that the change you are seeking (i.e. acceptance of trans identities and individuals) generates in your target audience. In this section, we:

- present how these fears may be addressed

- suggest how to build an approach that responds to their emotions and deeper concerns, as well as reflects their identity, values, and lived experiences, and

- offer some principles that can guide your work.

## SOUTHERN AFRICA

*The **AfroQueer** podcast and **MambaOnline**, a news and lifestyle website, are recent examples from Southern Africa of queer, digital outlets creating safe spaces for LGBT+ people to tell their own stories. They reclaim narratives from the negative stereotypes found in mainstream reporting – which portray LGBT+ people as victims of societal problems. For instance, they gave a platform to a Nigerian nonbinary poet and investigated the agency of film-makers to create queer content in Kenya and Uganda.[3]*

## TELL STORIES, NOT FACTS

Stories access our emotional brains, tapping into emotion drivers and moral reasoning. The right stories create empathy where facts alone will not help. They engage the listener to visualise the narrative in their mind, which resonates more than abstract facts. They help our linear brains put things in an order that makes sense.

There are a few key principles to keep in mind for effective storytelling as a tool:

### a. Effective stories transport people

Narrative transport happens when we are so caught up in a narrative that we strongly relate to the characters or their experiences. This is when we become more likely to empathise with them. Effective stories have familiar and relatable characters, to create shared identity, lived experiences,

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[3] Available at: afroqueerpodcast.com and mambaonline.com. See Season Four: Episode 5, MY GHOST (*afroqueerpodcast.com/2022/02/28/season-4-episode-6/*) for the non binary poet, and Season Four: Episode 3, Fighting For A Happy Ending (*afroqueerpodcast.com/2021/11/08/season-four-episode-3/*) for more on the film-makers example.

values, and beliefs. Including shared values facilitates persuasion. Familiar plots and relatable characters also calm audiences' fears that stem from unfamiliarity.

### b.  Effective stories follow a clear structure

A narrative arc frames the story, and includes a protagonist, an activating event, obstacles, a goal, transformation, and finally a call to action. TRUTH's *Trans Youth Storytelling toolkit* offers concrete advice on how to construct stories towards change.[4]

### c.  Effective stories show trans people in communities of support

It is critical to show trans people with a family member, co-worker, health professional, or other person in your communication materials, rather than showing them alone. This breaks the stereotype that trans people are always alone and do not have any support. Placing trans people with familiar figures elicits empathy amongst cisgender audiences. It creates a familiar person who audiences are more able to relate to, and calms their fear response (see the *Heartwired approach section* for more details). All of this sets the stage for the audience to better understand the trans person.

Showing a trans person with supportive family members in particular elicits the value of 'love of the family' and builds empathy.[5] Along similar lines, showing a trans person with an affirming healthcare professional, who says, 'transgender healthcare is essential healthcare', can also change attitudes towards trans-specific healthcare more effectively than the same message from a trans person alone.[6]

## TYPES OF STORIES

### a.  Journey stories

Journey stories are a form of storytelling which demonstrate a change in a protagonist's circumstances or a move from one condition or state to another – a change of heart. Research has found that journey stories are the most powerful for audiences. Key principles of journey stories for trans issues include:

- Trace a cisgender person's journey from expressing concerns or lack of familiarity with trans issues to a place of understanding and support.

- Establish the well-meaning struggle of the cisgender person.

- Acknowledge and normalise unfamiliarity and discomfort. If possible, have a trans person empathise with their unfamiliarity.

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[4] Gay-Straight Alliance and Transgender Law Center. (n.d.) Trans Youth, Storytelling toolkit for transgender and gender nonconforming youth and their families, Gay-Straight Alliance Network and Transgender Law Centre. Available at: *transgenderlawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/TRUTH-Storytelling-Toolkit-FINAL-Dec-2015.pdf*.

[5] Fenton, Meredith,Robert Perez, Amy Simon, and Phyllis Watts. (n.d.) Healthy People. Healthy Communities. A Toolkit for Effective Conversations About Transgender Healthcare Access. Basic Rights Oregon, Transgender Law Center, Fenton, Goodwin Simon Strategic Research, and Wild Swan Resources. Available at: *translawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/HealthyPeopleHealthyCommunitiesToolkitFinal.pdf*.

[6] Findings from the Transgender Law Center.

- Frame discomfort as an 'initial' state that diminishes over the course of the journey.

- Model how a cisgender person was able to manage or resolve their concerns. (For example, 'I realised that she/he/they needed me to be the friend I always had been.')

A journey story could involve different people. For instance, one kind of story to build empathy for trans people could be to speak about the shift of a trans person, as they go from not being their authentic self to becoming a healthier, happier person. Though this frame can feel like it's suggesting trans people need to follow a specific transition path, it is one which has proven effective for building audience understanding (in testing by Heartwired research for example).

In contrast, when we refer to the journey of a cisgender person, one type of journey story could be about family members who start out confused and scared. But, as they learn about trans identities, they become more supportive. A journey story could also be about doctors who at first did not know much about trans patients, did their own research, and are now advocates who help their patients live healthy lives.

Stories do not have to be long. Micro stories use bite-sized storytelling, often embedded into a longer written piece, or in a set of talking points.[7] It is possible to engage empathy and communicate a microstory in one to two sentences. Keeping stories focused on one person can help with clarity.[8]

**MICRO STORY**

*Jennifer, a graduate student, was born a boy but has long known herself to be a girl. She was prescribed oestrogen by her doctor, but her insurance company refused to pay for it. As a student on scholarship, she had no idea how she could afford the hormones she needed.[9]*

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[7] Fenton, Meredith, Robert Perez, Amy Simon, and Phyllis Watts. (n.d.) Healthy People. Healthy Communities. A Toolkit for Effective Conversations About Transgender Healthcare Access. Basic Rights Oregon, Transgender Law Center, Fenton, Goodwin Simon Strategic Research, and Wild Swan Resources. Available at: *translawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/HealthyPeopleHealthyCommunitiesToolkitFinal.pdf*.

[8] Findings from the Transgender Law Center.

[9] Findings from the Transgender Law Center.

## JOURNEY OF PASTOR IN SUPPORTING EQUAL MARRIAGE

*One example of a journey story in practice is outlined in the Healthy People Healthy Communities[10] resource. It comes from the US, where campaign materials were developed to build support for equal marriage after widespread reforms in the early 2000s banned the freedom to marry for same-sex couples in multiple states. Faith was a prime motivator to vote against equal marriage, and so the campaign connected to this as a core part of people's identity. The journey story featured a **video** of a Methodist pastor and his wife.[11]*



Michael and Robyn Gray
Old Orchard Beach, Maine

*Image source: Heartwired.[12]*

*Pastor Michael Gray tells the viewer he 'really struggled through this issue of same-sex marriage.' Robyn shares that, 'It weighed heavy on our hearts. We did pray about it.'*

*Gray expresses his Christian values when he states that his change of heart comes from his faith. He says, 'We're not here to judge one another. We're here to love one another.'*

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[10] Fenton, Meredith, Robert Perez, Amy Simon, and Phyllis Watts. (n.d.) Healthy People. Healthy Communities. A Toolkit for Effective Conversations About Transgender Healthcare Access. Basic Rights Oregon, Transgender Law Center, Fenton, Goodwin Simon Strategic Research, and Wild Swan Resources. Available at: *translawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/HealthyPeopleHealthyCommunitiesToolkitFinal.pdf*.

[11] Mainers United for Marriage. (2017) Michael & Robyn Gray. Heartwired. Available at: *vimeo.com/210476654*.

[12] Mainers United for Marriage. (2017) Michael & Robyn Gray. Heartwired. Available at: *vimeo.com/210476654*.

## b. Stories that highlight struggle

Seeing a narrative of a parent, sibling, or co-worker discussing their struggle towards acceptance of a trans person in their life can validate audiences' own struggles with understanding. This makes it easier to be open and empathetic.[13]

## c. Stories with an antagonist

People like to unite around a common enemy. Using a contextually-relevant antagonist can lead audiences to be more supportive of trans rights. In the US, focusing on health insurance companies worked well. Governments, or other common enemies, can also work in different contexts.[14]

**However, this approach should be used with care to minimise being divisive.** Other story models that make room for collaboration and openness can be equally effective.

### FURTHER RESOURCES

The *Heartwired strategy guide* outlines detailed guidance on storytelling. See page 19 for examples of how a story can be more effective.[15]

YouAct's *toolkit on abortion messaging* contains a section on storytelling as a tool to tackle abortion stigma. Storytelling can also be an empowerment tool for those telling their story.

[13] Fenton, Meredith, Robert Perez, Amy Simon, and Phyllis Watts. (n.d.) Healthy People. Healthy Communities. A Toolkit for Effective Conversations About Transgender Healthcare Access. Basic Rights Oregon, Transgender Law Center, Fenton, Goodwin Simon Strategic Research, and Wild Swan Resources. Available at: *translawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/HealthyPeopleHealthyCommunitiesToolkitFinal.pdf*.

[14] Fenton, Meredith, Robert Perez, Amy Simon, and Phyllis Watts. (n.d.) Healthy People. Healthy Communities. A Toolkit for Effective Conversations About Transgender Healthcare Access. Basic Rights Oregon, Transgender Law Center, Fenton, Goodwin Simon Strategic Research, and Wild Swan Resources. Available at: *translawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/HealthyPeopleHealthyCommunitiesToolkitFinal.pdf*.

[15] Find more detail in Pérez, Robert' and Simon, Amy. (2017) Heartwired, Human behavior, strategic opinion research and the audacious pursuit of social change. A strategy guide for change-makers. Wonder: Strategies for Good and Goodwin Simon Strategic Research. Available at: *heartwiredforchange.com/download-heartwired/*.

# 3. Developing effective messages

There are key stages for developing effective messages that will influence audiences:

- understanding what is meant by a 'message'

- setting goals

- identifying your audience

- understanding your audience, their knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and values

- drafting messages

- testing what approach will influence your audience

- monitor, evaluate, and repeat.

In this section, we will explain the different stages in developing messages, some research strategies, detailed prompts and questions to guide your work, and additional suggestions on how to take your work on narrative change forward.[16]

As a general rule for this process, we recommend open dialogue with the trans and broader LGBTI+ community. This can help get the community on board and better understand audience challenges and research results.

If you have the resources and capacity available, we recommend building an advisory group of trans activists embedded in the messaging research and development process. This is particularly important when there is risk of a disconnect between the messages that will reach and convince your audience and the actual needs of trans people you generally serve. An advisory group can demonstrate evidence to support, or adjust, the communication approach and provide space for community reflection and discussion before adopting messages.

In the following sections, we outline a range of strategies and research approaches you can use in the stages of developing messages. Some require more resources and capacity than others. General cost estimates are indicated with € - €€€ after each action. You can decide which approach will work best for you depending on your goals and intended reach.

See PIRC and ILGA-Europe's how to test your communications for guidance on low resource research methods, different testing methodologies, and survey, interview, and focus group templates and guides.[17]

[16] Many come from Pérez, Robert and Simon, Amy. (2017) Heartwired - Human behavior, strategic opinion research and the audacious pursuit of social change. A strategy guide for change-makers. Wonder: Strategies for Good and Goodwin Simon Strategic Research. Available at: *heartwiredforchange.com/download-heartwired/*.

[17] Sanderson, Bec. (no date) How to test your communications. Public Interest Research Centre and ILGA-Europe. Available at: *ilga-europe.org/files/uploads/2022/06/Testing-Your-Communications.pdf*.

# WHAT DO WE MEAN BY A 'MESSAGE'?

A message is a precise statement that includes everything you want to say to your audience. There are four sections to a message:

1. What you want to achieve?

2. Why you want to achieve it?

3. How you propose to achieve it?

4. What you want your audience to do about it?

None of these sections should be more than 40 words long.

First, create a basic message. It should convey one message at a time and be in simple, clear, and non-technical language.

Be direct and memorable. Make it credible, with evidence or analysis. Be clear about what will be different for your audience if they believe your message.[18]

## FURTHER RESOURCES

AmplifyChange's *site of user guides* includes a Campaign Checklist with helpful prompt questions.

# SETTING GOALS

The first stage of developing effective messages is to develop a theory of change and identify the concrete change you want. Once this question is defined and answered, you can develop a set of initial hypotheses to test.

The following questions can help refine these hypotheses.

• Which attitudes do you need to impact for the change to occur?

• Who are your potential persuadable audiences?

• What messengers do they need to hear from to be persuaded?

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18 Coulby, Hilary. ANEW (2010) Advocacy Communications, A Handbook for ANEW Members. ANEW - Africa Civil Society Network for Water and Sanitation. Available at: *www.pseau.org/outils/biblio/resume.php?d=4501&l=en*.

**Want to take this further?**

To take a more detailed approach to goal-setting, you can follow some research approaches. These include:[19]

**Facilitated discussions with advocates:** This involves hearing from other advocates about what has worked or not worked in their experience to change attitudes. This will help identify barriers to change. *(€€)*

**Communication audit:** It is important to review your external communications across platforms – such as your website, social media, or other platforms – to assess how you communicate currently. This will give you insight into the clarity and effectiveness of your communications, and how to refine in the future. *(€€)*

# IDENTIFYING YOUR AUDIENCE

AVERT, a communications and campaign actor on HIV, identifies three essential steps for a successful communications campaign: **know your audience**, **meet them where they are** on an issue, and **co-create and test messages with them.**[20] Be as specific as possible about who you are targeting, as this will allow you to focus your research and later refine your messages to be highly tailored to them. In this and the following sections, we will describe the different steps involved in identifying your audience that will reflect the three steps laid out by AVERT.

### 3.3.1 Find the moveable middle

To identify the moveable middle, start with the issue you want to change, and survey attitudes from a sample across the general public towards that issue. This could use data from existing resources like the Eurobarometer.[21]

### Want to take this further?

**Conduct a baseline survey** to check where people stand, or determine which groups of people constitute the moveable middle, and what characterises them (e.g. age, gender, location, political leaning).[22] *(€-€€)*

To identify very specific groups in the moveable middle who you might already identify as target audiences (e.g. white women feminists), a **baseline survey** could focus on this group by delineating

[19] Pérez, Robert and Simon, Amy. (2017) Heartwired - Human behavior, strategic opinion research and the audacious pursuit of social change. A strategy guide for change-makers. Wonder: Strategies for Good and Goodwin Simon Strategic Research. Available at: *heartwiredforchange.com/download-heartwired/*.

[20] From dialogue with Sarah Hand, ANEW.

[21] European Commission. (2019), Special Eurobarometer 493 Report: Discrimination in the European Union. European Commission. Available at: *https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2251*.

[22] Pérez, Robert and Simon, Amy. (2017) Heartwired - Human behavior, strategic opinion research and the audacious pursuit of social change. A strategy guide for change-makers. Wonder: Strategies for Good and Goodwin Simon Strategic Research. Available at: *heartwiredforchange.com/download-heartwired/*.

their characteristics, and draw out their beliefs, values, and attitudes. Follow up **focus groups** or **1-1 interviews** would allow for deeper and detailed questions on attitudes and responses to messages or specific topics. *(€€)*

### 3.3.2 Approach via those already supportive

There is an option to reach the moveable middle by starting with audiences who are already supportive. They can help spread a new idea to the somewhat supportive who then cascade it to the next group who are more undecided – the moveable middle. In this way, ideas spread along a continuum, where one audience influences the next to gradually build support.

### Want to take this further?

If you want to take this approach, a baseline survey can help identify those who are already supportive. This measures people's attitudes towards an issue before seeing any communications content, and provides a way to compare any changes before and after this is shown to them. *(€-€€)*

# UNDERSTAND YOUR AUDIENCE, THEIR KNOWLEDGE, BELIEFS, ATTITUDES, AND VALUES

## 3.4.1 Mapping the landscape

Mapping the landscape helps you to understand how your audience currently experiences issues relating to trans people. You can start by asking how your audience reacts to communications about trans people. You might want to:

Map how your target audiences think.

- Identify message frames, words, images, metaphors, associations, and emotions currently being used to communicate about transgender people.

- Analyse how current narratives and stories are constructed and used.

- Learn from existing public opinion research.

Use a **baseline survey** to ask questions that gauge where audiences stand on your issue currently. This helps estimate the scale of effort needed to succeed and which audience sub-groups could be most useful to focus on. *(€-€€)*

**Online surveys** can be a useful tool to reduce social desirability bias i.e. the urge to say the expected response. *(€)*

**Creating a persona** of the audience you have identified can be a helpful tool to pinpoint their age, gender, religion, education, occupation, family status, etc. These can help you understand what might motivate them and build more effective messages. Results from mindset research and other methodologies described below can hone these over time. See this Advocacy Communications Toolkit (Section 3) for ideas.[23] *(€)*

### Want to take this further?

If you have more resources and capacity available, there are more in-depth research approaches you can follow to understand your audience. These include:

**Media audit:** Analyses coverage and existing message frames on your issue, which message frames are dominant in the media, who voices them, and the journalistic biases on the issue. *(€€€)*

**Narrative analysis and construction:** Looks at existing stories and unpacks their frames, context, audience, characters, structures, and key words or emotions invoked. *(€€€)*

**Public opinion research review:** Examines research previously conducted on your topic to determine whether this can be used as a baseline to measure attitudinal change against, or whether you need to develop your own survey questions to measure this. *(€€€)*

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[23] Coulby, Hilary. (2010) Advocacy Communications, A Handbook for ANEW Members. ANEW - Africa Civil Society Network for Water and Sanitation. Available at: *www.pseau.org/outils/biblio/resume.php?d=4501&l=en.*
 ANEW (2010) Advocacy Communications, A Handbook for ANEW Members, H Coulby, *http://www.freshwateraction.net/sites/freshwateraction.net/files/ANEW_advocacy_communications_handbook_draft.pdf.*

### 3.4.2 Mindset research

To change attitudes on emotionally complex social issues, an audience's barriers to understanding first need to be unpacked. One of these can be an empathy wall or empathy gap. These can occur when there is no shared identity. For instance, when cisgender people struggle to understand trans people, this can provoke emotional distancing.[25] This is a barrier to deep understanding, that can make people feel indifferent or hostile to someone with different beliefs or background. It can contribute to seeing them as 'other'.[26] Information gathered from mindset research can help identify these barriers.

Mindset research unpacks what our audience thinks and feels about trans people. It maps life experiences, identities, beliefs, and values influencing the mindsets of the people you are trying to reach. It enables us to find points of connection and identify which shifts in their beliefs and attitudes are required to achieve the desired change. These points allow us to develop messages that talk to an audience's deeply held values, rather than trying to change these values.

You can use mindset research to:

- Explore interactions between trans rights and audiences' emotions, values, cognitive reasoning, and moral judgments.

- Reveal how individual and collective identities enable or undermine support.

- Determine where audiences experience internal conflict about trans people and how to leverage that for change.

- Show how audiences connect and create meaning from patterns they see and hear.

[24] van Heerde Hudson, Jennifer., Hudson, David., Clarke, Harold., and Stewart, Marianne..(2016) UK public attitudes towards development. How the Aid Attitude Tracker can help make the case for aid and development. Bond. Available at: *www.bond.org.uk/resources/uk-public-attitudes-towards-development/*.

[25] Fenton, Meredith, Robert Perez, Amy Simon, and Phyllis Watts. (n.d.) Healthy People. Healthy Communities. A Toolkit for Effective Conversations About Transgender Healthcare Access. Basic Rights Oregon, Transgender Law Center, Fenton, Goodwin Simon Strategic Research, and Wild Swan Resources. Available at: *translawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/HealthyPeopleHealthyCommunitiesToolkitFinal.pdf*.

[26] Pérez, Robert and Simon, Amy. (2017) Heartwired - Human behavior, strategic opinion research and the audacious pursuit of social change. A strategy guide for change-makers. Wonder: Strategies for Good and Goodwin Simon Strategic Research. Available at: *heartwiredforchange.com/download-heartwired/*.

- Discover what narratives audiences bring to their understanding of trans rights.

- Understand how audiences' lived experiences (or perceptions of experiences) shape emotional reactions.[27]

**Want to take this further?**

Some suggested research methodologies are:

- **In-depth interviews:** One-on-one conversations, which allow for probing an individual's attitudes, beliefs, and values more deeply. *(€€€)*

- **Deep listening focus groups:** This approach reveals people's reasoning patterns, as well as their values, identities, and emotions through rich back-and-forth discussions among a small group of people. *(€€€)*

- **Dyads, triads, and quads:** These are small group sessions with two, three, or four people to understand how family members or groups of friends talk with each other about the issue of focus. It allows you to probe where people have differing opinions and understand the more subtle ways people are influenced to change their minds. *(€€€)*

- **Online focus groups:** These allow for geographically disparate participants to come together in single or multiple sessions. They can be used to test message content, images, and videos. You can also iteratively test and incorporate feedback over multiple days. *(€€)*

# DRAFTING MESSAGES

As you begin to draft messages targeted towards the moveable middle, the following key questions can serve as a guide:

- How do you persuade audiences to support the change you are seeking?

- What messages and messengers will resonate with audiences that reflect their values?

- How can you get audiences to identify with messengers?

- What un/conscious associations need to be disrupted? And, what should they be replaced with?

- What are the alternative narratives to the problem that align with audience identities and values?

- How are opposition messages and messengers triggering resistance?

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[27] Pérez, Robert and Simon, Amy. (2017) Heartwired - Human behavior, strategic opinion research and the audacious pursuit of social change. A strategy guide for change-makers. Wonder: Strategies for Good and Goodwin Simon Strategic Research. Available at: *heartwiredforchange.com/download-heartwired/*.

Keep in mind that a stepping-stone conversation might be needed. Audiences may be better engaged if we begin with a more relatable issue or introductory message. New conversations can be gradually introduced about the priority issue after they are engaged in that initial conversation.[28]

## TESTING YOUR APPROACH

User testing with your identified audiences allows you to understand how they may respond to draft messages, the nuances of their values and identities which affect this, and what revisions need to be made to your communications framework and dissemination platforms.

A simple way to test initial drafts of the messages before in-depth user testing is to conduct online surveys. These allow you to test lengthier messages, or audio and video messages.

**Want to take this further?**

- **Telephone surveys:** Allow for representative samples within a specific location.[29] *(€€)*

- **Message-testing focus groups:** A small representative group can be used to test different approaches and screen out inaccessible language or images which do not work. *(€€)*

- **Message-test videos:** An alternative way for audiences to assess messages that combine content, context, and messengers in one platform, via video.[30] *(€€€)*

ILGA Europe has a useful set of guides on message testing and framing.

## 3.7 MONITOR, EVALUATE, REPEAT

Keep monitoring how your messages are received and experienced by audiences. And, crucially, keep an eye on how effective they are in building understanding and empathy with audiences. You can do this through ongoing audience testing of messages, and using this information to adapt and refine further messages.

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[28] Pérez, Robert and Simon, Amy. (2017) Heartwired - Human behavior, strategic opinion research and the audacious pursuit of social change. A strategy guide for change-makers. Wonder: Strategies for Good and Goodwin Simon Strategic Research. Available at: *heartwiredforchange.com/download-heartwired/*.

[29] Pérez, Robert and Simon, Amy. (2017) Heartwired - Human behavior, strategic opinion research and the audacious pursuit of social change. A strategy guide for change-makers. Wonder: Strategies for Good and Goodwin Simon Strategic Research. Available at: *heartwiredforchange.com/download-heartwired/*.

[30] Pérez, Robert., and Simon, Amy. (2017) The Heartwired Toolbox. Strategic research tools to accelerate social change., Wonder: Strategies for Good and Goodwin Simon Strategic Research. Available at: *heartwiredforchange.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Heartwired-Toolbox-digital.pdf*.

# CONCRETE APPROACHES ON STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS FOR TRANSGENDER RIGHTS

We will now dive into two approaches to communications to influence social change. The first is the Heartwired approach. The second, in the following section, is the Race Class Gender Narrative.

We share more content on the Heartwired approach because it has a longer and deeper evidence base, with more resources available detailing the approach. The Race Class Gender Narrative is a comparatively newer approach, with less detail to share. This imbalance is not an indication of a preference of one approach over the other.

## 4. Approach 1: Heartwired communications

### KEY INFORMATION

| | |
|---|---|
| **Audience** | moveable, or conflicted, middle. |
| **What it's about** | convincing people to support transgender rights who might never have thought about transgender people. The information is based on evidence from US-based user testing. |
| **Pros** | proven track record of change in the US; some scope for inclusion of nonbinary identities. |
| **Cons** | application in Europe is less tested; original research focused on binary transgender identities and stereotypical transitions; intersectionality is difficult to incorporate. |
| **When to use it** | as part of a specific campaign, linked to mobilising an audience towards a policy change, vote, or decision. |

# OVERVIEW

The Heartwired approach is an approach to research and strategy creation. It was developed based on research by Goodwin Simon Strategic Research and Wonder: Strategies for Good. This was used to create communications methodologies that are more likely to lead to desired audience responses about socially sensitive issues. This approach is rooted in an understanding of psychology.

The Transgender Law Centre and Movement Advancement Project later applied the Heartwired approach and further adapted it in their work. These organisations have been involved in various capacities in extensive research since 2011, using communications to target audiences and move them to a tipping point, including on trans rights.

This approach is about messages designed to convince the moveable, or conflicted, middle. This is different from approaches used with allies, or approaches used to respond to direct attacks from anti-trans actors. Rather, it is about reaching people who have spent little time thinking about trans people, who are conflicted, or who are open to persuasion, and convincing them to support trans rights.

Goodwin Simon Strategic Research and Wonder: Strategies for Good carried out research in the US, using:

- media audits

- psychological analysis

- reviews of public opinion research

- in-depth Interviews,

- focus groups with policymakers, advocates, human resource specialists, business leaders, and medical professionals.

**DISCLAIMER!**

The strategic communications relied on by the Heartwired approach can pull from biased concepts that can feel very frustrating. The content might be upsetting, or feel invalidating, because it focuses on binary transgender identities, and holds less space for diverse and intersecting transgender and nonbinary identities, as well as more nuanced understandings of our gender history.

This is because this communications approach is not about fundamentally shifting an audience's worldview. Rather, it tries to connect with the audience's existing values to apply to these new contexts. This approach is not for every audience. It is a tool to use at a particular moment, in a targeted context, with a specific goal and audience in mind. For an example, see the Section 3 case study on Prague Pride: We Are Fair, who used similar principles in a boundaried campaign. In this context, they focussed on securing equal marriage, separate from the rest of their work.

This means that for some contexts, goals, or audiences, it might not be the right approach to use. The Race Class Gender Narrative might be more appropriate – see the following section on this approach. It is up to you to choose what will work best in your context based on the evidence presented and your knowledge of your audience.

As you review this section, please bear in mind that the principles were developed from findings that reflect the initial purpose of the research – to find what would motivate audiences to support a specific law change or to build support for transition-related health insurance coverage.

# THEORY BEHIND THE APPROACH

The Heartwired communications approach is based on an understanding of human psychology. Specifically, it focuses on how our brains respond to new and unfamiliar ideas. What follows is a summary of the core concepts underpinning this understanding, which help explain the way the Heartwired approach is structured.

### 4.2.1 Identity, lived experiences, values, beliefs, and emotions

For any issue that is emotionally complex, our attitudes and beliefs are shaped by: identity, lived experiences, values, beliefs, and emotions. When we are introduced to a new issue for the first time, it may cause us to question one or more of these factors, causing internal conflict.[31] Conversely, when there is alignment between all five, decisions are straightforward.[32]

**Emotions**

Feelings in response to stimuli. Emotions drive behaviour particularly when we feel threatened and need to make split-second decisions.

**Lived Experiences**

Meaning made from events and relationships that a person experiences in their life.
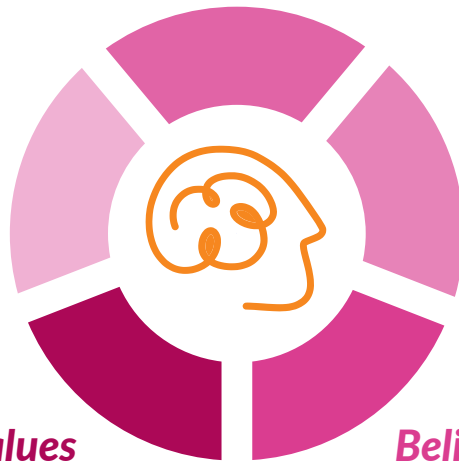
**Identity**

How one sees oneself in relation to the world. Identity incorporates many facets and traits.

**Values**

Ideals held about good and bad, right and wrong. Values influence emotions, beliefs and behaviours and are often shared within a culture or community.

**Beliefs**

Ideas held to be true. When we have little experience with something, we tend to fill in the knowledge gaps with assumptions.

*Source: Heartwired.*[33]

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[31] From an interview with Robert Perez, Wonder: Strategies for Good.

[32] Pérez, Robert and Simon, Amy. (2017) Heartwired - Human behavior, strategic opinion research and the audacious pursuit of social change. A strategy guide for change-makers. Wonder: Strategies for Good and Goodwin Simon Strategic Research. Available at: heartwiredforchange.com/download-heartwired/.

[33] Shared by the Heartwired team..

**Upstairs, thinking brain:** responsible for decision-making, thinking, reflection, empathy.

**Downstairs, primitive brain (the amygdala):** responsible for basic functions (breathing), innate impulses (fight or flight), strong emotions (anger, fear). Shuts down the upstairs in response to fear.
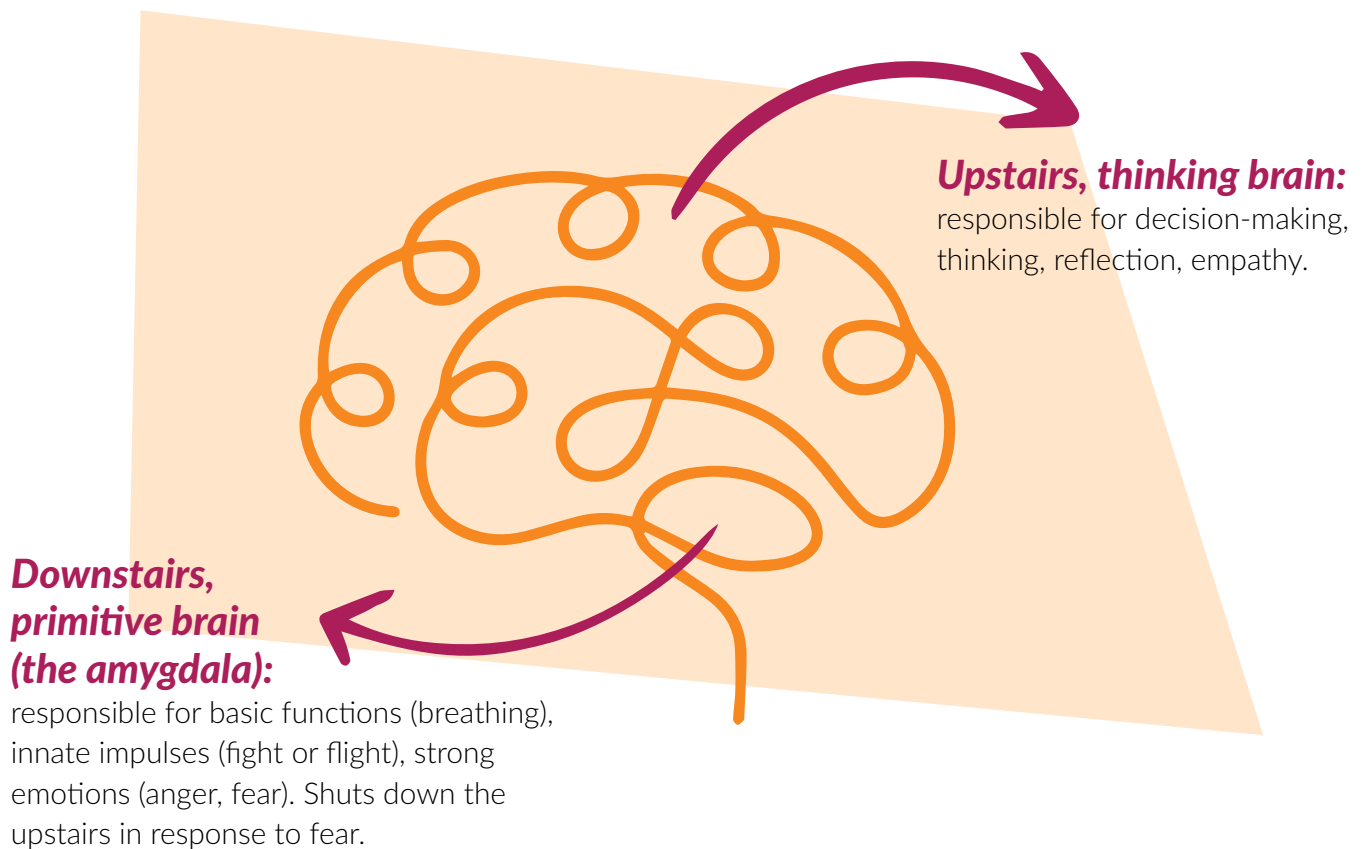
### 4.2.2 Mental templates

A mental template is a set of images and associations people have with someone/something.[34] It subconsciously impacts their emotional reactions to others.[35] When we know someone well who is trans, we have a deeply nuanced understanding of them, and often, some understanding of trans experiences. If we do not know someone who is trans, we have a surface level understanding, or a **flawed mental template**. This causes us to fill in the gaps in our knowledge with inaccurate information or stereotypes, often based on pop culture or outdated media images (e.g. that trans women are drag queens).[36]

### 4.2.3 Reasoning chain

A reasoning chain is the way people's associations and connections lead them to develop assumptions that take them to a particular conclusion.[37] Flawed mental templates lead to broken reasoning chains. This causes mental shortcuts, where we fit new information into our existing belief system, and discard any facts that do not fit.

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[34] This idea was developed by clinical and social psychologist Dr. Phyllis Watts.

[35] Pérez, Robert and Simon, Amy. (2017) Heartwired - Human behavior, strategic opinion research and the audacious pursuit of social change. A strategy guide for change-makers. Wonder: Strategies for Good and Goodwin Simon Strategic Research. Available at: *heartwiredforchange.com/download-heartwired/*.

[36] From an interview with Robert Perez, Wonder: Strategies for Good.

[37] Pérez, Robert and Simon, Amy. (2017) Heartwired - Human behavior, strategic opinion research and the audacious pursuit of social change. A strategy guide for change-makers. Wonder: Strategies for Good and Goodwin Simon Strategic Research. Available at: *heartwiredforchange.com/download-heartwired/*.

For instance, not understanding that gender identity is held deeply within, and thinking that surgery is scary and irreversible, leads to the belief that gender affirming surgery is cosmetic and not an essential health need.

We cannot change our audience's entire worldview in a short period – and that is not necessary to make progress. We need to work within it, and connect to their core values, to help people form complete reasoning chains.[38] We need to speak in ways that lets people hear us.

### 4.2.4 Upstairs/downstairs brain

On socially sensitive issues, the downstairs brain is triggered by fear. This activates the fight or flight response. The thinking brain is overwhelmed and unable to consider what is being said, and understanding and persuasion becomes limited. When this happens, our audience can no longer hear us when we speak. This includes, for example, particularly effective narratives that centre on children and young people and 'irreversible damage' from hormones to people's reproductive capacity. All of this activates the audiences' fear response and protective instincts.

The triggers that activate this response – or confusion from the downstairs brain – can be varied, such as when a person is unable to identify with trans people or when someone is introduced to new concepts like gender identity or unfamiliar terminology, like 'assigned at birth' or 'cisgender'. Anti-gender actors are incredibly good at triggering and keeping people in this fear response with their messaging.

According to the Heartwired approach, even if we have strong views on what we want to communicate, sticking to our usual language might trigger this fear response. Rather, we need to focus on language that will calm this response:

> When the downstairs brain is calm, our upstairs brain has the capacity to pause and be reflective. We can make rational decisions, and aspire to be our better selves. This is where we need to use **messages that decrease confusion and anxiety**.

> People need to be able to access their upstairs brain to hear thoughtful reasons to be supportive of trans rights. We can do this by building trust. When we emphasise shared values and build trust and familiarity, we help audiences manage and calm their discomfort and negative emotions.

> This allows audiences to tap into different perspectives. It can open a path to empathy, after which audiences can be moved toward acting compassionately. In the long term, this can increase their capacity to support trans people.[39]

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[38] From an interview with Robert Perez, Wonder: Strategies for Good.

[39] From an interview with Robert Perez, Wonder: Strategies for Good.

### 4.2.5 Mindset roadblocks

Mindset roadblocks come from a lack of familiarity and discomfort with trans people, as well as perceived threats to someone's own identities or beliefs. This can stem from a struggle to understand what it is like to be trans and from core beliefs about gender which do not align with the trans experience, such as a binary sense of gender as an integral aspect of one's lived experience. This inability to identify with trans people cuts off access to empathy.

People can react to their discomfort by rejecting what they see as the source of discomfort – in this case, trans people. To increase understanding, we need to support people to understand their discomfort as something happening internally to them, instead of something they should project onto trans people.[40]

Mindset roadblocks alert us to the fact that a person might have a flawed mental template and broken reasoning chain about trans people. This puts the person in a highly agitated state when thinking about trans people. In building support for trans rights, we need to fix the mental template and reasoning chains in order to calm the discomfort and confusion.

## COMMUNICATING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: HEARTWIRED PRINCIPLES

Based on this understanding of the psychology of understanding and empathy, the Heartwired communications approach provides the following six steps as a pathway to construct convincing messages that result in change.

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[40] Fenton, Meredith, Robert Perez, Amy Simon, and Phyllis Watts. (n.d.) Healthy People. Healthy Communities. A Toolkit for Effective Conversations About Transgender Healthcare Access. Basic Rights Oregon, Transgender Law Center, Fenton, Goodwin Simon Strategic Research, and Wild Swan Resources. Available at: *translawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/HealthyPeopleHealthyCommunitiesToolkitFinal.pdf*.

## 4.3.1 Build understanding

Promoting understanding and support is critical. It allows people to access their 'upstairs brain' and move towards empathy. The downstairs brain can be calmed with familiar images and accessible language (e.g. a family eating around a table). Giving space to ask silly questions also helps people move toward understanding.

### a.  Name and normalise unfamiliarity

To build understanding, we need to **name and normalise people's unfamiliarity** and respect that people are on their own journey. As a first step, acknowledging that the discomfort exists can be enough to help people get unstuck.

> *'It can be hard to understand what it means to be transgender, especially if you've never met a transgender person.'* [41]

### b.  Describing 'transgender'

Heartwired tested different phrases and explanations to create an ideal definition that resonates well with audiences. An accessible description helped reduce confusion and fear.

> *'A transgender person is someone whose sex at birth is different/opposite from who they know they are on the inside.'* [42]

Use these five key elements:

1.  Identify the person as transgender at the outset.

2.  Point to the fact that a trans person's body at birth does not match who they know they are on the inside. Avoid focusing too much on the transition process.

3.  Note that they have known this from an early age.

4.  Mention that their transition enables them to live as the gender they have always known themselves to be.

5.  Clarify the 'direction of transition'.

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[41] Movement Advancement Project. (2021) Talking About Transgender People & Restrooms. Movement Advancement Project. Available at: *mapresearch.org/talking-about-transgender-people-and-restrooms*.

[42] For explanations and research behind this language developed see Fenton, Meredith, Robert Perez, Amy Simon, and Phyllis Watts. (n.d.) Healthy People. Healthy Communities. A Toolkit for Effective Conversations About Transgender Healthcare Access. Basic Rights Oregon, Transgender Law Center, Fenton, Goodwin Simon Strategic Research, and Wild Swan Resources. Available at: *translawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/HealthyPeopleHealthyCommunitiesToolkitFinal.pdf*.

People are often not aware that trans men exist, and can read them as a trans woman who is dressing femme in private. When messengers instead started saying, '*I'm a transgender man, my gender was female at birth/I'm transitioning to be a man.*' This tested as much clearer for audiences.

In a sentence, this could look like:

> *'I'm a transgender man. I was born and raised as a girl, but inside I always knew I was male. So I transitioned, and now I live every day as the man I've always known myself to be.'*

See an example in action in Transform California's video story about *Pau Lagarde*.

**NOTE:** Remember when we mentioned that this approach can be frustrating? This is the perfect example. We know that this one sentence, while relevant to many people in the transgender community, undermines the complexity of many others. This is about finding a balance between staying true to ourselves and fostering familiarity. It is never an easy thing to do, so make sure that, whatever you go for, you feel comfortable with.

### 4.3.2 Use shared human values

People's attitudes are guided by their value systems. When messages are built on shared values, the audience is more likely to hear our message. We can use the emotional power of people's values to change attitudes within their belief systems.

Based on research in the US context, Heartwired partners identified core values as:

**1. The love of family**

> *'I don't fully understand what it must be like to be trans, but I do know that every transgender person is someone's son or daughter. If I had a child who was transgender, I would hope that she or he would be treated fairly and with respect.'*

**2. It is not for us to judge**

People want to see themselves as good and 'not judging'. This appeals to our positive self image and allows people to move towards support for an issue without forcing them beyond their limit.

*'When I'm honest with myself, the idea of being transgender makes me feel uncomfortable. Despite my discomfort, it's not for us to judge.'*[43]

We recognise that these are which work in certain Western, middle class, secular contexts. Other shared values could be work values, European/national values, personal, or religious values.[44] Ultimately, you will need to determine, through research, what are the most relevant shared values in your context.

### 4.3.3 Using stories in an effective sequence

Stories are powerful tools. They let you convey your message, access your audience's emotional brains, and help elicit empathy. Stories can help them visualise the narrative in their mind and put things in an order that makes sense. Equally, information in the wrong order can create negative responses. Heartwired's effective communications structure applies common storytelling sequences:

1. Name and normalise unfamiliarity.

2. Describe what it means to be trans.

3. Highlight core, shared values that create empathy.

4. Set out the journey or transformation story, and introduce validating sources (e.g. family, healthcare professional) who give moral authority and credibility.

5. Show that the trans person is not fundamentally changed as a person 'after' their transition, even while they are changed in other ways (e.g. happier, healthier).[45]

### 4.3.4 Use strategic messengers

Who tells a story is as critical as the content of the story. It is important to use messengers who reflect the identities of your audience, or who they can relate to, and therefore are more likely to identify with. This helps facilitate empathy, and can impact the persuasiveness of a message.

Identification is important for relatability and to build understanding. It opens a path to reflection and empathy, after which audiences can be moved toward acting compassionately. When judging another person, people first consider whether they are a friend or enemy. Only after this do they

[43] Fenton, Meredith, Robert Perez, Amy Simon, and Phyllis Watts. (n.d.) Healthy People. Healthy Communities. A Toolkit for Effective Conversations About Transgender Healthcare Access. Basic Rights Oregon, Transgender Law Center, Fenton, Goodwin Simon Strategic Research, and Wild Swan Resources. Available at: *translawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/HealthyPeopleHealthyCommunitiesToolkitFinal.pdf*.

[44] For research into national values in Europe see the Atlas Of European Values at *europeanvaluesstudy.eu/education-dissemination-publications/education/atlas-of-european-values/*.

[45] Fenton, Meredith, Robert Perez, Amy Simon, and Phyllis Watts. (n.d.) Healthy People. Healthy Communities. A Toolkit for Effective Conversations About Transgender Healthcare Access. Basic Rights Oregon, Transgender Law Center, Fenton, Goodwin Simon Strategic Research, and Wild Swan Resources. Available at: *translawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/HealthyPeopleHealthyCommunitiesToolkitFinal.pdf*.

consider a person's competence – whether they have the ability to deliver the message or not.

Who the trusted messenger is will vary with context, but they must be persuasive and relatable to the audience. Messengers can be **trans people, family members, employers or colleagues, healthcare providers, religious leaders, or policymakers**. A range of messengers who can allow people to be comfortable with trans people – specifically geared towards cis audiences – is key.

Using people from the general public, or unlikely heroes, can be more effective than using celebrities, as they are more relatable.[46] The Heartwired principles advise that the greater number of characteristics a messenger shares with an audience, the more relatable they are. Having a cis person speak out in support of trans issues, then, can be more impactful, as many audiences can relate to them more. For instance, **parents or siblings** who have gone through an emotional journey are powerful messengers, and can emphasise how they worked past unfamiliarity and confusion. Similarly, the Heartwired research found that audiences are comforted when a **medical professional** speaks on trans-specific healthcare. Audiences generally see them as credible. Their audience testing found that having a doctor speak positively about the benefits of hormone therapy made audiences more supportive than when a trans person talked about this.

Equally, Heartwired research found that **trans messengers** disrupt negative stereotypes and show trans people as people. Speaking about family, faith, workplace, and unique talents, among other aspects, gives a rounded image with roles people can relate to. Sharing your own family journeys, such as the experience with your parents and their emotional journey, can also be powerful.

At the same time, Heartwired found audiences relate better to trans people with binary gender and gender conforming expression and less to people who they perceive as 'not passing' or register as their assigned gender.



*Photo by Mick De Paola on Unsplash. LGBT+ people as strategic messengers.*



*Photo by Ashkan Forouzani on Unsplash. A doctor as a strategic messenger.*



*Photo by CDC on Unsplash. A parent and child together can be messengers.*

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[46] da Empoli, Giuliano. (n.d.) The Endless Sea. Imagining a Story of Tomorrow. More in Common. Available at: *theendlesssea.com/executive-summary/*. Looks at communication techniques needed to shift to more positive-leaning future as a holistic and motivational practice.

Whoever the messenger, positive and uplifting emotional affect is key. Spokespeople who are relaxed, confident, and comfortable are critical to disrupting existing negative stereotypes. We need to create a sense of relatability, approachability, love of family, and other shared values that lead people to a positive, more accurate mental template.[47]

*Photo by Alex "Lexi" Webster on Canva. A nonbinary couple as potential messengers.*

**NONBINARY MESSENGERS AND MESSAGES**

*The Movement Advancement Project found they could integrate non binary experiences of gender, in an iterative approach. But, first, this requires sensitivity to what an audience can take on and ensuring that they are fully on board with binary trans identities. They found when an audience does not understand trans identities, it can be premature – and harmful to understanding – to introduce binary and nonbinary identities at once.*

*The **Trans Youth Storytelling toolkit** adds guidance on how to describe nonbinary transgender or gender non-conforming people in ways that are simple, clear, and relatable. Start with an explanation, then introduce terminology and emphasise the journey towards affirmation:*

*'I was assigned male at birth, but being a boy never felt right to me, and neither did being a girl. I've always felt that I'm somewhere in between.'[48]*

The Heartwired approach was used to test messaging on intersex people as a path for talking about nonbinary people. This messaging gives concrete examples that gender is far more complex than we ever realised. The research suggests that Heartwired messaging could be adapted to communicate directly about nonbinary people. For the most part, it's only been introduced after discussing binary trans identities. For instance:

*'It can be hard to understand what it means to be nonbinary, especially if you've never met a nonbinary person.'[49]*

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[47] From an interview with Sean Lund, Movement Advancement Project.

[48] Gay-Straight Alliance and Trangender Law Center. (n.d.) TRUTH – Trans Youth, Storytelling toolkit for transgender and gender nonconforming youth and their families, Gay-Straight Alliance GSA Network and , Ttransgender Law Centre. Available at:, *transgenderlawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/TRUTH-Storytelling-Toolkit-FINAL-Dec-2015.pdf*translawcenter.org/truth.

[49] From an interview with Robert Perez, Wonder: Strategies for Good.

### 4.3.5 Foster familiarity

The Eurobarometer of social attitudes in 2019 found that only between 2-29% of the general public knows someone who is trans, versus up to 82% knowing someone gay, lesbian, or bisexual.[50] This comparative lack of contact causes people to have a flawed sense of what it means to be trans.[51]

The first step to gaining support is to build familiarity. Positive mainstream media coverage can be important to shift attitudes. Leveraging popular media outlets (TV, social media, etc) can increase visibility and the number of people who move towards empathy for trans people.

### 4.3.6 Contextualise your issue

Contextualising the issue you are speaking about – whether it is legal gender recognition, healthcare, or any other – is important to help audiences recognise its significance for a trans person. This helps them understand why they should care about that issue.

When contextualising an issue, we must remember to embed it in a broader story to avoid triggering an '*us-versus-them*' mentality. On healthcare for instance, replace phrases like '*transgender people have unique healthcare needs*' with '*transgender people need healthcare just as everyone needs healthcare.*'[52]

This is an this example of contextualising a message about not discriminating against transgender people:

*'I believe that all people should be treated fairly and equally. That's why it's so shocking to realise that in this day and age, more than half the states in the U.S. still do not have laws that explicitly protect LGBTQ people from being evicted from their home, kicked out of a business that's open to the public, denied health care, or denied government services based on who they are.'* [53]

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[50] European Commission. (2019) Special Eurobarometer 493 Report: Discrimination in the European Union. European Commission. Available at: *europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2251*. The survey asked "Do you have a friend or acquaintance who is trans?". Results are summarised in the report.

[51] From an interview with Robert Perez, Wonder: Strategies for Good.

[52] Fenton, Meredith, Robert Perez, Amy Simon, and Phyllis Watts. (n.d.) Healthy People. Healthy Communities. A Toolkit for Effective Conversations About Transgender Healthcare Access. Basic Rights Oregon, Transgender Law Center, Fenton, Goodwin Simon Strategic Research, and Wild Swan Resources. Available at: *translawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/HealthyPeopleHealthyCommunitiesToolkitFinal.pdf*.

[53] Adapted from Movement Advancement Project resources. For more information, visit *mapresearch.org/talking-about-transgender-people-and-restrooms*.

## Do's and Don'ts when communicating about transgender people from the Transgender Law Centre[54] and Movement Advancement Project:[55]

### DO'S

Use 'transgender people' instead of 'trans' for audiences who are deeply unfamiliar with transgender people.

Refer to 'transgender people' or 'people who are transgender' as often as possible.[56]

Explain terms that might be unfamiliar, even a term like 'transgender man' that might be intuitively clear to us, but which can be confusing to other, less-familiar audiences.

Stay away from terms that are too insider. For example, avoid 'cisgender,' which most people don't understand, and use 'non-transgender' or 'people who are not trans' instead. Also 'sex assigned at birth' does not resonate with audiences' experiences of gender as a given. Instead, 'opposite' sex worked best, although 'different from' also worked better.

Spell out acronyms (like UN) and abbreviations (like LGBTI) every time you use them with audiences who are not familiar with them.

Focus on shared experiences when talking about gender non-conforming people.[57]

Simple descriptions work better, e.g. 'I was born male but inside I always knew I was female', or 'I was born and raised as a boy.'

### DONT'S

Avoid name-calling – terms like 'bigots' or 'hateful' can alienate the conflicted middle, who think this is talking about them personally. Measured, relatable language opens the door to empathy and identification.

Don't talk about transgender people 'choosing' e.g. which toilet to use. This plays into harmful stereotypes and misconceptions.

Avoid getting into conceptual arguments about gender. If the audience perceive this as trying to argue them out of their lived experience of gender, it can entrench negative attitudes and resistance.

Don't talk about 'rights' or make direct comparisons between different discriminations, especially based on race.

Don't dismiss people's fears/concerns as invalid or false. Instead, provide them with information they can use to calm those concerns and help them re-engage with our shared values.

Avoid blaming others (e.g. opponents, the audience) for fears/concerns.

Avoid anything that disparages religion or religious beliefs.

The 'wrong body' frame doesn't work. Many people feel it invokes judgement or has a negative moral overtone.

Don't assume the conflicted audience properly interprets language that's second nature to us.

Don't skip a description with the assumption that the audience will catch up on their own.

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[54] Findings from the Transgender Law Center.

[55] Movement Advancement Project. (2021) Talking About Transgender People & Restrooms. Movement Advancement Project. Available at: *mapresearch.org/talking-about-transgender-people-and-restrooms*. From an interview with Sean Lund, Movement Advancement Project.

[56] Movement Advancement Project (2020) An Ally's Guide to Terminology: Talking About LGBTQ People & Equality. 2020 edition. MAP's Talking About LGBT Issues series. Movement Advancement Project. Available at: *lgbtmap.org/allys-guide-to-terminology*.

[57] Findings from the TransgenderLaw Center.

# IN PRACTICE: A TESTED EXAMPLE ON TOILETS [58]

## Normalise unfamiliarity

Build familiarity with transgender people and acknowledge that many people aren't quite there yet.

## Emphasise shared values

Movement Advancement Project advises to begin with basic messaging, moving to more nuanced messaging later.

Emphasise initial shared values — in this case shared concerns about privacy and modesty. Focus on privacy solutions that serve everyone without encouraging discrimination.

'It can be hard to understand what it means to be transgender, especially if you've never met a transgender person.'

'Safety and privacy in restrooms is important for all of us. That's why we already have laws in place that make it illegal to harm or harass people, or invade their privacy. These laws are used to prevent assault, keep people safe, and hold offenders accountable.'

'All of us, including transgender people, are concerned about safety in restrooms. And when we stop and think about it, it's already illegal to enter a restroom or locker room to harm someone, period. Non-discrimination laws don't change that.'

'Transgender people are part of our workplaces and our neighbourhoods, and they need to be able to use the restroom just like everyone else.'

## Calm concerns about safety and privacy

Remind the moveable middle audience that transgender people have long been protected from discrimination without any increase in public safety incidents. Anti-discrimination laws do not change the ability of a venue to set rules for appropriate behaviour and take action against individual actors who break the rules. And that such laws don't change the ability of a venue to set rules

It is also important to emphasise that current laws and enforcement already protect everyone from harm, harassment, invasion of privacy. On the other hand, denying transgender people access to an essential space like toilets actively hurts them.

## Use shared values to return to issue-specific messaging

Help people understand how transgender people are hurt when they are denied access to toilets.

[58] Movement Advancement Project. (2021) Talking About Transgender People & Restrooms. Movement Advancement Project. Available at: mapresearch.org/talking-about-transgender-people-and-restrooms.

# 5. Approach 2: Race Class Gender Narrative

## KEY INFORMATION

**Audience**  moveable middle and supportive base
(those already strongly agreeing with us).

**What it's about**  a means to communicate to the moveable middle while
being intersectional and not undermining our values (of
inclusivity, nonbinary genders, nuanced transition stories)
or isolating our supporter base. Comes from the results of a
nationwide US-based survey.

**Pros**  accessible language which can reach the supporter base, as
well as the moveable middle. A way to build solidarity with
other marginalised groups (along race, class, and gender
lines) and social justice movements.

**Cons**  evidence of audience impact is limited to one study for now.

**When to use it**  in specific campaigns and circumscribed communications to
targeted audiences around a call to action.

## OVERVIEW

The Race Class Gender Narrative comes from work in the US by ASO communications, the
Transgender Law Centre, and Lake Research Partners.[59] They identified a point of tension
between trans communities and activists – largely due to approaches that simplify and reduce
the complexity of transgender identities. They developed the Race Class Gender Narrative to be
deliberate about placing more emphasis on trans liberation and moving away from language that is
binary. It is a communications approach which aims to reach the moveable middle without isolating
the existing supportive audience base.

It was also developed to address the lack of public opinion research or targeted narrative
development that focuses on contextualising trans rights within the broader fight for racial, gender,
and economic justice.

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[59] ASO Communications, Transgender Law Center, and Lake Research Partners. (2022) Messaging Guide. Transgender Youth and the Freedom
to Be Ourselves. Building Our Choir with a Race Class Gender Narrative. ASO Communications, Transgender Law Center, and Lake Research
Partners. Available at: *static1.squarespace.com/static/5fd0f29d0d626c5fb471be74/t/61b13d00236e2f7f2dbb9a36/1639005441624/
Transgender+Youth+and+the+Freedom+to+Be+Ourselves.pdf*.

# THEORY BEHIND THE APPROACH

### 5.2.1 Criticisms of other communications approaches

The Race Class Gender Narrative critiques communications approaches that use the 'respectable trans person' trope. These tropes present only trans people with binary genders, who conform to mainstream beauty standards, normative gender expressions, and heterosexuality. Putting forward this image as the primary narrative of trans people's lives only creates short term wins. Ultimately, they can reinforce unwanted values, like conservatism and racism.

This is part of a broader practice among communications campaigns of only giving value to marginalised people who excel or overcome something. This is problematic, as it fails to recognise everyone's value, and reinforces a conformist view.

Only focusing on calming discomfort tacitly supports a reductive worldview of class and gender. It also siloes trans rights from allied causes. Additionally, the Race Class Gender approach explicitly critiques much of LGBT advocacy for being colour-blind or failing to acknowledge race.

By acknowledging the ways that anti-trans voices weaponise racism, classism, and misogyny, the Race Class Gender Narrative also addresses attacks on critical race theory and feminism.

### 5.2.2 Finding an alternative

To counter this narrow frame of what a trans person should be, the Race Class Gender Narrative encourages weaving in stories about a wider range of trans experiences that centre people whose experiences are marginalised. This will demonstrate that trans people do not have to be famous, desirable or hard-working to deserve care and liberation. Think what multiple marginalised axes could be represented to counter reductive stereotypes (e.g. agender trans people who have refugee status, are muslim, gender non-conforming, and disabled)!

The Race Class Gender Narrative sees building these connections as part of a broader strategy. They help connect trans issues with other social justice movements. Vocal, resilient, mulitracial coalitions, which champion transgender rights as an inclusive part of their vision, are vital to creating longer-term change .

In practice, this means not basing messaging solely on trans celebrities, politicians, or hard-working, 'successful' trans people who uphold certain beauty standards, desirability, and status. Instead, messages that bring together shared values, experiences, and demands across movements will create change, especially, when they recognise how these values are experienced by trans people with complex, intersectional identities.

*Photo by Juan Moyano on Canva. Showing an intersex-inclusive progress pride flag.*

# COMMUNICATING FOR INTERCONNECTED SOCIAL JUSTICE: RACE CLASS GENDER NARRATIVE

ASO Communications, the Transgender Law Centre, and Lake Research Partners tested two messages in the United States using this approach. They found that these messages outperformed anti-trans messages and neutralised the impact of anti-trans attacks with the moveable middle. For the supportive base, the messages helped to mobilise them to action.

The Race Class Gender Narrative shares some similar principles with the Heartwired approach. Based on their research, they also found that people, including allies, struggle to understand and find familiarity with trans people.

It starts with needing to first build shared values and familiarity with trans people. They also found that personal storytelling is most powerful for reaching audiences, especially for deep, long-term change. The key difference between the Heartwired approach and Race Class Gender Narrative, is that the Race Class Gender Narrative uses these stages to explicitly address the intersections between race, class, and gender. It does not reinforce the narrative that being trans is an experience reserved for white people.

There are two key elements to this approach:

- Tell a convincing story about how anti-trans voices use strategic racism and transphobia to harm us all.

- By coming together, we can ensure we all have the freedom to be ourselves and support one another.

There are four stages to construct these elements into effective messages.

## 5.3.1 Start with a shared value

Open with a shared value, explicitly naming or evoking race, class, and gender. The Race Class Gender Narrative was used to develop and test three messages on US-based audiences across age groups, genders, racial and economic backgrounds, through a national survey. The messages were built around three different shared values. They received varied responses from different audiences.

a.  **Freedom to be ourselves**. This message tested as most effective at shifting the moveable middle away from anti-trans narratives and towards being more supportive. This was particularly true for Black people, people of colour, and Latinx people.

b.  **Treating each other with dignity and respect**. This tested as the top message for the moveable middle of every racial group.

c.  **Treating others as we want to be treated**. This was the strongest message for already supportive audiences and Generation Z (born 1997-2012).

They found audiences identify with the feeling of being boxed in, especially when contrasted against the freedom to be ourselves. This framing helped mobilise the already supportive base, using language like *'respected, trusted, empowered to make decisions…transgender or not.'*

### 5.3.2 Name the villains

Name the villains who violate our values, expose their motivation to reclaim or hold onto power, and position them as a barrier to what trans people need.

> *'But some people try to get and hold onto power by putting us in boxes based on what we look like, where we're from, or our genders. They stoke fear so we turn against some group instead of demanding what our families need.'*

### 5.3.3 Call out the villains' tactics

Be explicit in calling out how anti-trans actors operate. One way to do this is to reframe attacks as part of a broader strategy from anti-trans actors, and then connecting justice for trans people with racial and economic justice. There are two specific frames here:

1. How the villains exploit divisions across races:

> *'We see this in how schools tell Black kids how to keep their hair or send girls home for the clothes they wear.'*

2. How they exploit the audience's lack of familiarity with trans people:

> *'And in how certain politicians exploit lack of familiarity with transgender people, excluding transgender kids from healthcare, school, or sports.'*

### 5.3.4 Deliver a unifying call action

Deliver a unifying call to action that the audience can use to create a positive vision or outcome, aligned with the initial shared value.

> *'By joining together, we can make this a place where we are all free to thrive and support each other for who we are.'*

### 5.3.5 Terminology

The approach also holds a different perspective on terminology. Using the word 'genders' (instead of 'gender') had a positive effect on reframing audiences' understanding of gender. Presenting gender as a spectrum avoids exceptionalising transgender people and helps audiences identify with this shared experience more easily.

## CROSS-CUTTING COMMUNICATION PRINCIPLES

Similar to the Heartwired approach, the Race Class Gender Narrative grounds messages in values shared across genders, avoiding emphasising the unique harms faced by trans people which exceptionalises the community. Instead, highlighting shared experiences is effective in helping audiences find routes to identify with trans people. These could be by drawing on mundane or daily tasks, like childcare and grocery shopping, or deeper and profound experiences and emotions, like love, loss, and anxiety about the future.

Remember to prepare audiences with a positive values statement. When audiences are presented first with a negative statement, it makes them less likely to trust trans people. For example, when the first statement is about the 'crushing weight of discrimination' trans youth face, the supportive base were less likely to trust young trans people to know what is best for their own health and wellbeing. This contrasts with the opposite effect when primed with a statement about how we should all be free to express our authentic selves.

# IN PRACTICE: MESSAGE FRAMES

Naming the villains who violate our values and position them as a barrier to what transgender people need.

## Authentic selves

*Across our races, backgrounds and genders, we want to be treated with dignity and respect. But today, certain politicians are pushing laws that restrict our freedoms because of the colour of our skin, what's in our wallets, or because we are trans. They exploit divisions and fears among us so they can get and hold onto power, denying us the basic rights, resources, and respect all people deserve. By [rejecting this division/passing protections against discrimination], we can ensure each one of us has the freedom to be ourselves, pursue our dreams, and have a good life — no exceptions.*

### Treating each other with dignity and respect frame

Delivering a unifying call to action aligned with the shared value of freedom to be ourselves.

### Calling out the villains' tactics,

using the frames of how the villains exploit divisions across races...

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Naming the villains, and making clear their motivation to claim power.

## Freedom from boxes

*Whether we are Black, white, or brown, Native or newcomer, transgender or not, we want the freedom to be ourselves. But some people try to get and hold onto power by putting us in boxes based on what we look like, where we're from, or our genders. We see this in how schools tell Black kids how to keep their hair or send girls home for the clothes they wear. And in how certain politicians exploit lack of familiarity with transgender people, excluding transgender kids from healthcare, school, or sports. They stoke fear so we turn against some group instead of demanding what our families need. By joining together, we can make this a place where we are all free to thrive and support each other for who we are.*

### Freedom to be ourselves frame

...and linked idea of freedom from boxes.

### Calling out the villains' tactics using two frames:

how the villains exploit divisions across races

and

how they exploit the audience's lack of lack of familiarity with transgender people.

Delivering a unifying call to action aligned with the initial shared value of freedom to be ourselves.

# CASE STUDIES

Below are case studies of successful campaigns. These can be used for training on message development, or adapted for message development and testing.

## PRAGUE PRIDE: WE ARE FAIR

We Are Fair is a daughter organisation of Prague Pride. They developed a campaign for Prague Pride about marriage equality. Their goals were to raise public awareness and advocate for the legalisation of equal marriage.

### STARTING POINT

The political context around marriage equality was very fluid and changing rapidly. A bill was going to parliament as the campaign was being developed. We Are Fair had core messages around dignity, equality, and making children's lives better already. But, they didn't know who they were talking to. As a small organisation, they also did not have the time to identify their audience or understand how to adapt to them.

Following an ILGA-Europe workshop and introduction to their toolkit on message framing, and with the support of a grant, they took the time for campaign research and focussed development.

### WHAT DID THEY DO?

We Are Fair contracted a political communications strategist to conduct qualitative surveys of the general public on attitudes towards:

- **equal marriage**

- **gay relationships**

- **equality**

- **what audiences saw as important.**

The strategist drew out key insights for the team, which helped identify who were in the moveable middle. This group became the target audience for two focus groups. These focus groups were used to clarify what messages would gain traction. They tested visuals, simple photos, and messages.

We Are Fair realised that messages about dignity did not land. People in their focus groups didn't associate marriage with dignity – instead with happiness and quality of life. Although many could name gay and lesbian people they knew personally, the biggest barrier came from equal marriage not being of direct personal importance to people.

Further, visuals of two women in wedding dresses or two women with a baby, were not read as romantic couples getting married or with their child. Instead, they were often understood as sisters or friends. So We Are Fair refined messages to be clearer and specific from the outset. '*We need marriage for two mothers or two fathers, so they can raise their children safely.*'

From this, We Are Fair created a 'communications bible' of words and narratives to use around marriage, children, family, and relationships. The key message was: '*We are people like you, with the same goals, same struggles. We want to live a happy, quiet life.*'

## IMPACT

The research helped We Are Fair realise their responses to opponent attacks were emphasising the conflict, which audiences responded to negatively. They moved away from responding on social media. Instead, they engaged journalists to write comments as a third party. Following this, opponents stopped naming them directly and began using broader terms around 'LGBT propaganda' instead.

We Are Fair is still measuring campaign success. So far, they found social media attacks have reduced, and are unaware of any negative reactions to campaign messaging from the target audience.[60]



*Source : From We Are Fair confidential research report on campaign findings*

## KEY LEARNINGS

- Contracting a communications/PR expert was vital to guide and support the research and message development process.

- Adapting messages to the Czech context and testing with moveable middle target audiences was essential. This guided how to refine and adapt strategies for maximum impact.

- Investing in explaining campaign aims and research findings to the LGBT+ community increased their understanding and support for the messages and approach.

- Using data to demonstrate voter support convinced politicians.

- Introducing gay couples to decision-makers through other messengers (e.g. religious LGBT partners) can be more effective, versus broad media promotion.


# IRELAND: LEGAL GENDER RECOGNITION REFORM

Ireland has undergone several recent progressive legislative changes. This case study draws out details of legal gender recognition reform advocacy led by *Trans Equality Network Ireland (TENI)* and feminist organisations.

## STARTING POINT

There was no provision to legally change one's gender or birth certificate in Ireland prior to 2015. Lydia Foy's cases from 2002 onwards to the High Court against the Irish State, who refused to issue her a new birth certificate, drew attention to the lack of legal gender recognition. The judge's ruling that Irish law was thereby incompatible with the European Convention on Human Rights sparked the process towards legal reform. This was supported by advocates.[61]

## WHAT DID THEY DO?

Women's groups advocating for marriage equality around the same time integrated legal gender recognition reform into their advocacy. Transgender advocates were given a platform to speak on self-determination of gender identity alongside women's groups at marriage equality rallies. Similarly, pro-abortion campaigns used trans-inclusive messaging, and their advocacy on abortion legislation was trans- and nonbinary-inclusive. This stemmed from a strong intersectional, trans-inclusive feminist movement, established in the 1990s after intense debates around including trans women.

In working to secure legislative change, Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI) engaged in continued advocacy. They spoke at events to influence policy- and decision-makers, and put out a

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[61] High Court of Ireland Decisions. (2007) Foy -v- An t-Ard Chláraitheoir & Ors [2007] IEHC 470 (19 October 2007). High Court of Ireland Decisions. Available at: *www.bailii.org/ie/cases/IEHC/2007/H470.html* .

steady stream of articles and interviews in supportive mainstream newspapers and media outlets.

Their influence was focussed on more traditional advocacy tactics, as development of the legislation did not go to a national referendum for public vote. Irish legislators took the British Gender Recognition Act 2010 as a template. They updated it by removing the divorce clause and introducing self-determination, before consulting for feedback.[62]

## IMPACT

The advocacy was successful, and the Gender Recognition Act passed in 2015. This Act gives trans people the right to access a Gender Recognition Certificate, update their birth certificate, and legally identify as their correct gender, based on self-determination. Though it is one of a handful of countries to model self-determination, the legislation only recognises binary identities. It also requires parental consent for 16-17 year olds, and provides no facility for under-16s.[63] A further bill, currently before parliament, looks to rectify this.[64]

## KEY LEARNINGS

- Building strong, intersectional relationships with allies can provide a long-term foundation for shared advocacy goals and support. Honest conversations with feminist actors about transgender inclusion in the short term can have long-term payoffs.

- Finding opportunities to integrate transgender advocacy into related issues can create a domino effect when change happens.

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[62] From an interview with Sara Philips, Trans Equality Network Ireland.

[63] Chiam, Zhan., Duffy, Sandra. and González Gil, Matilda. (2017) Trans Legal Mapping Report: Recognition before the law. International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex Association. Available at: *www.refworld.org/docid/5a5f5ca24.html*.

[64] Houses of the Oireachtas. (2020) Gender Recognition (Amendment) Bill 2017 (Bill 43 of 2017). Houses of the Oireachtas. Available at: *www.oireachtas.ie/en/bills/bill/2017/43/*.

# CONCLUSION

This toolkit shares key strategies and examples to develop effective communications, specifically to influence social change among the moveable middle. Additionally, it highlights cross-cutting communication principles that can be used to communicate for change. The messaging and strategy you employ should depend on the level of audience knowledge and your own research and testing, to make it the most effective.

It also shares the strengths and weaknesses of the Heartwired approach and the Race Class Gender Narrative. These should offer important concepts and useful starting points to develop your own messages, or adapt the messages these approaches offer, to reach your audience and address the context you work in. For both approaches, it is important to remember that the moveable middle audiences are reached by messages that target the general public, as well as specific messages that appeal to them as policymakers, doctors, teachers. Many individuals and organisations simply lack information on trans issues. However, they can become strong allies and dedicated attention and research is needed to develop messages that can influence them. These two approaches offer a starting point and show us that there is scope to use these communications principles and message content in advocacy towards policy-makers, in submissions towards human rights bodies, in closed conversations with allies, human rights defenders, or other LGBT+ activists.