

Talking about human rights

How to identify and engage a
range of audiences

Background

We asked ComRes to conduct research to help us understand public attitudes to human rights and to specific human rights issues, and inform our work to promote understanding of the importance of human rights. The research has focused in particular on gaining a more detailed picture of people with mixed views on human rights – a group identified in **previous research** – and their values and motivations to support human rights. This is a summary of our key findings and recommendations for talking to the public about human rights.

Who is this for?

This summary will be particularly useful for NGOs, public bodies and other individuals and organisations working in areas that relate directly or indirectly to human rights and equality. It will also be helpful to anyone else with an interest in communicating effectively about the importance of human rights.

Why is this important?

Great Britain has a long tradition of protecting and promoting human rights at home and abroad. Human rights are fundamental to our way of life, and we must guard against anything that weakens them, including the laws and mechanisms that allow individuals to enjoy and enforce them. Yet, human rights can seem like a difficult topic to discuss with the public. Certainly, they have suffered from a bad reputation in recent years, with a review from 2013 finding that 'human rights' was only used in a positive context in 30% of articles, blogs and parliamentary speeches in Great Britain. Our own media analysis found that articles about human rights published by six major news outlets over the course of 2017 were dominated by a discussion of Britain's relationship with Europe and immigration.

We have a **statutory duty** to promote awareness, understanding and protection of human rights. Our objectives are to safeguard and enhance the human rights legal framework.

Although human rights compete with a number of other issues on the policy agenda, public opinion can often influence policy-makers and government priorities. We believe that if we can increase public understanding of what human rights are and the positive value they bring, then people become powerful stakeholders and supporters of the work we and other organisations are doing.

Key findings

1. The audience

Attitudes towards human rights are complex and nuanced.

It is important to identify different audiences and how to talk to them.

Our research confirmed previous findings that a large proportion of the general public feel conflicted about human rights. We then looked deeper into people's understanding of human rights, perceptions of human rights in general and of individual issues, their values and interest in knowing more. On the basis of this segmentation analysis, we were able to identify six distinct groups who have shared attitudes towards human rights.

The table below shows the characteristics that each group are statistically more likely than average to have. This may offer useful insights into platforms and channels for engaging with different groups.

However, we should not assume that everyone in a specific group has these characteristics or thinks in a specific way.

Entrenched
Opponents



Disengaged
Neutrals



Cynical
Challengers



Individualist
Sceptics



Conflicted
Supporters



Enthusiastic
Advocates



Proportion of GB population

10%

21%

18%

16%

14%

21%

Who they are

Like systems and sovereignty, but are intolerant of equal rights for minority groups

Uninformed about human rights, but care about some individual human rights issues

Pessimistic about what human rights have achieved, and doubt they benefit personally from them

Recognise that they benefit from human rights, but don't believe all people are deserving

Engaged with human rights but distrusting of authority

Optimistic and empowered defenders of human rights

Entrenched Opponents 

Disengaged Neutrals 

Cynical Challengers 

Individualist Sceptics 

Conflicted Supporters 

Enthusiastic Advocates 

More likely than average to be...

Aged 45+ (80%)
Male (59%)
Retired (38%)
Vote Conservative (49%)
Christian (60%)
Live in a town (46%)

Aged 18-44 (70%)
In London (18%)
Employed (72%)
Ethnic minority (13%)

Female (58%)
Vote Labour (38%)

Aged 45+ (69%)
Male (64%)
In South and East England (38%)
Retired (32%)
Socioeconomic grade ABC1 (70%)
Vote Conservative (48%)
Have tertiary education (79%)

Female (66%)
In North England (31%)
Employed (69%)
Socioeconomic grade C2DE (60%)
Vote Labour (39%)

Socioeconomic grade ABC1 (65%)
Vote Labour (53%)
Have tertiary education (89%)
Live in an urban setting (47%)

Believe human rights are important

5%

43%

66%

66%

79%

89%

Interested in learning more about human rights

12%

46%

55%

45%

58%

71%

Entrenched Opponents 

Disengaged Neutrals 

Cynical Challengers 

Individualist Sceptics 

Conflicted Supporters 

Enthusiastic Advocates 

Top three issues

Democratic voting and the legal system (81%)
Protection of British lifestyle and values (81%)
Protection of privacy of personal lives and data (80%)

Provision of basic health and education for all (44%)
Free speech (42%)
Protection of privacy of personal lives and data (41%)

Provision of basic health and education for all (93%)
Everyone going through the judicial systems is treated fairly (86%)
Protection of privacy of personal lives and data (84%)

Everyone going through the judicial systems is treated fairly (90%)
Provision of basic health and education for all (88%)
Free speech (88%)

Privacy of personal lives and data (89%)
Basic health and education for all (88%)
Free speech (88%)

Basic health and education for all (96%)
Everyone going through the judicial systems is treated fairly (93%)
Free speech (93%)

Greatest support compared with average

Protection of British lifestyle and values (81%)

Provision of support for those in developing countries (28%)

Provision of basic health and education for all (93%)

Everyone going through the judicial systems is treated fairly (90%)

Equality for the LGBT community (67%)

Fair treatment for ethnic and faith minority groups (83%)

News sources (top 3)

Daily Express/Daily Mail/The Sun (36%)
None (28%)
Local newspaper (16%)

None (35%)
Metro (20%)
Sky News website (19%)

None (29%)
Local newspaper (28%)
Daily Express/Daily Mail/The Sun (20%)

None (24%)
Daily Express/Daily Mail/The Sun (23%)
Local newspaper (21%)

None (34%)
Local newspaper (22%)
Daily Express/Daily Mail/The Sun (20%)

Huffington Post/BBC News (32%)
Guardian/Independent (31%)
Local newspaper (24%)

2. Understanding of human rights

The more informed people feel about human rights, the more likely they are to think human rights are important. Educating the public about human rights, what they mean and how they work, may help address the lack of knowledge that can lead to negative and resistant views.

Our research shows the general public do not feel confident that they know a lot about human rights. Just under half the British adult population (45%) say they have a fair amount of knowledge on the subject, with just 5% who say they know a great deal. This means that half the British population feels that they have limited or no knowledge about human rights.

Those who consider themselves to know a great deal about human rights are more likely to say human rights are important (91%), compared with those who say they know nothing about human rights (64%). This indicates the existence of a cognitive

deficit model – i.e. people who consider themselves to have a slim or inaccurate knowledge of human rights are more likely to be more critical about human rights.

In addition, our qualitative research suggests that some people express resistance towards an idea that they feel less knowledgeable about. The Disengaged Neutrals, who report a lack of knowledge about and ambivalence towards human rights, showed a particularly marked increase in their level of interest in human rights as they became more exposed to them during discussions.

Entrenched
Opponents



Disengaged
Neutrals



Cynical
Challengers



Individualist
Sceptics



Conflicted
Supporters



Enthusiastic
Advocates



Knowledgeable about human rights

38%

45%

50%

58%

43%

63%

3. Attitudes towards human rights

A key drivers analysis is a powerful means of identifying the views that drive support for an idea. The research identified which ideas motivate each audience to believe that human rights are important, and also those ideas which have a negative impact on their perceived importance.

We found that the majority of the public already support specific human rights issues and agree with certain human rights principles. Our survey showed that the specific human rights issues with the greatest support are those that are easiest to relate to, such as the right to healthcare and education. Civil and political rights that affect everyone also receive a great deal of support, with privacy, fair treatment in judicial systems, free speech and democratic voting all given a high rating by three-quarters of the public.

Our key drivers analysis showed that certain beliefs have a negative impact on support for human rights. These views vary for each group. For example, Enthusiastic Advocates who think that human rights are necessary in countries with unstable governments but not in Britain are more likely to think that human rights are not important. Those in the less engaged groups who have negative views about migrants, refugees and the EU are less likely to think that human rights are important. These views also frequently emerged in the qualitative discussions with the groups who have mixed views towards human rights, and these groups frequently cited negative stories from the media.

The key drivers analysis also identified some of the ideas that have a positive impact on support for human rights. These include:

Brexit

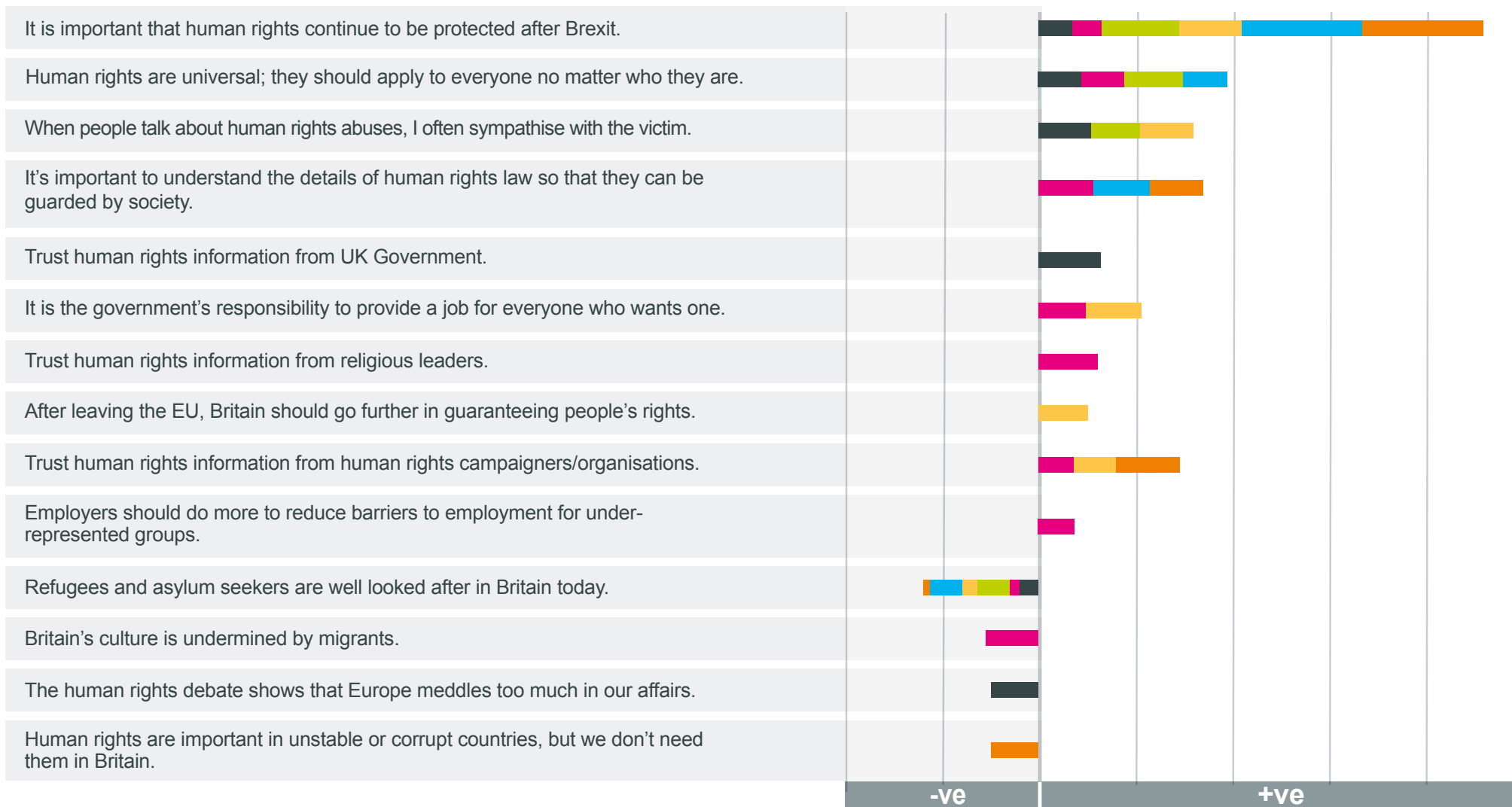
The most significant driver to emerge across all the groups is the need to protect human rights laws after Brexit. However, it is important to note that the qualitative discussions suggest that the emphasis should lie on maintaining human rights standards rather than on legislative changes. The technical complexity of Brexit largely prompts a jaded response, and the topic risks immediately dividing an audience into Leave and Remain camps, which can limit the discussion to engrained Brexit arguments such as migration. However, Brexit may offer a real means of illustrating the value of human rights by employing a loss-aversion approach – but this would need to be developed and tested.

Universality

Another belief that motivates people to view human rights as important is that human rights should apply to everyone, no matter who they are. The universality of human rights also emerged in the qualitative discussions as a compelling concept and a shared cultural value. This complements the sense of pride in British ethical standards and track record in protecting human rights – a view held even by those with reservations about how human rights are used (or misused).

Views which drive the belief that human rights are important

The results of the key drivers analysis show the views that have an impact on the belief that human rights are important. Positive drivers have a positive influence on an audience's belief that human rights are important, and negative drivers have a negative influence on this. The degree of influence that each view has on this belief also differs - the longer the bar, the more it impacts that audience's belief that human rights are important.



Recommendations

Our findings can help you identify which audiences you should communicate with depending on your objectives, and offers insights into the channels you can use in order to engage them more effectively.

The following are three practical suggestions, based on our research, of how you can build people's understanding of human rights and their importance.

1. Talk about human rights positively

The language of human rights is rarely used day-to-day – people are much more likely to talk about equality. The result of this is that human rights are largely considered to be something that lawyers, politicians and journalists discuss – i.e. those who operate in a world that feels separate from many people's everyday lives.

As conversations about human rights in the media are overwhelmingly negative, there is a pressing need to reclaim

the term and reframe it in a positive way. A good example of this approach is the **Act for the Act** campaign, which tells stories of how human rights have enabled different people in the UK to protect themselves and their families. One of these stories received a positive response in qualitative discussions. This approach challenges the dominant narrative and builds positive associations, helping people to view human rights as relevant to their lives.

2. Connect people with what they value

On the whole, the public don't recognise specific issues or principles as falling under the wider human rights umbrella. There is an opportunity to use the issues that people support to demonstrate that, in many cases, they effectively support human rights already. For example, you might start by explaining that basic education for all is a human rights issue and use this to open a conversation about human rights and other human rights issues. Focusing on the issues people care about also has the potential to provide a bridge to a wider conversation about human rights more generally, and particularly to support for human rights as an overall concept.

People feel increasingly pressured to pay attention to a cluttered media world of messages and appeals, and often express campaign fatigue. However, by approaching a conversation through familiar issues and topics, the intellectual and emotional labour is greatly reduced, and creates a significantly easier path via which to engage.

Human rights issues that are universal provide an opportunity for talking about human rights in a way that will resonate with the widest audience. People need to feel that human rights are relevant to them, and that they are protected by them on a daily basis. Demonstrating this through more relatable stories of human rights can help to challenge misconceptions.

3. Set out a long-term strategy for demonstrating the importance of human rights

Organisations should set out a clear vision for how they would like human rights to be understood and valued by the general public, and a long-term strategy for how this will be achieved.

There is real potential in forming a coalition of organisations with a shared vision of protecting and promoting understanding of human

rights. This would allow the pooling of resources and expertise, and enable a strategic approach to communicating about human rights and reframing in a more positive light. A coordinated effort like this has the potential to bring about significant shifts in how human rights are seen, similar to the success of recent joined-up efforts on marriage equality and mental health.

This research was conducted by **ComRes**, who are specialist communications, stakeholder and public policy researchers based in Westminster.

The research project included the following steps:

Literature review

Review of relevant papers, articles and recent research on human rights messaging.

Interviews with experts working in human rights messaging.

Thematic analysis of a wide range of news articles that mention human rights from December 2016 to October 2017.

Quantitative survey and analysis

Quantitative survey of a nationally representative group of 2,000 British adults, conducted in November 2017.

Segmentation analysis to identify natural attitudinal groups in the data.

Key drivers analysis (regression modelling) to understand what motivates each segment to view human rights as important.

Qualitative discussion groups

Six discussion groups conducted across England, Scotland and Wales targeting three segments to explore how to communicate with them: Conflicted Supporters, Cynical Challengers, and Disengaged Neutrals.

The group discussions were broken down into four main sections: understanding spontaneous and prompted views towards specific human rights issues; evaluation of previous human rights campaigns; testing of messaging on human rights issues; and understanding preferences for messengers and channels.

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