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Human rights and the power of plain language

To make their messages heard, human rights advocates must move away from overly-complex and clichéd communication towards plain and concrete language

As a human rights advocate, I often wonder why the enemies of human rights are successful at getting their messages across while we struggle to catch the public's attention. While our campaigns look like aircraft-towed aerial billboards, disinformers and hatemongers use targeted ads – next-generation advertising. We're slow and laborious; they're fast and effective. We talk about concepts; they generate emotion-based messages that resonate with large audiences. They make people more likely to buy their *products*.

By contrast, our 'infringements on the right to privacy', 'restrictions on free expression', and 'assaults on civic space' don't ring a melodious bell. What are we getting wrong and what are they getting right? How can we make sure that human rights messages actually mean something to people, especially in an age of ultra-polarisation, fed by the current social media business models?

Pitfalls of human rights campaigning

If we leave grammar and syntax errors aside, sentences are weak because of word and phrasing choices. When we use expressions that are absent from everyday life, we make human rights resemble an alchemical treatise rather than a chat between ordinary people. We sound like C-3PO speaking some obscure alien language, not like human beings with flesh, blood and emotions. As a result, many people think that our messages aren't meant for them; they are too impersonal, sometimes pompous.

Hyperboles and euphemisms are also counterproductive. Hyperbolic assertions raise credibility issues: they put people on guard. Being arrested at a demonstration and detained for identity verification isn't a *serious* violation. Being tortured is. Similarly, indirect ways of saying things that we could express directly (euphemisms, circumvolutions, metalepses)

undermine trust in locutors. For instance, not every violation is *egregious* – let's keep the word for truly outrageous acts. Not everyone says 'arbitrarily detained' – let's find a simpler adverb to express the reality we seek to describe: innocents behind bars.

Another issue is our use of clichés. 'Be on the right side of history', 'Hold *X* or *Y* accountable' and demands for 'justice' for pretty much anything aren't just hackneyed and trite; they're irritating. They make us lose people.

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Last, sentences that fail to elicit sensations are recipes for failure. Saying that a state committed an 'abhorrent assault on the right to life' is less clear than saying it hanged a man. The former is fine in legal briefs, not in public campaigns. By conveying a concrete image, the latter's effects are stronger.

All human rights advocates and campaigners – including me – have made these very mistakes. And there are only good reasons to make them.

First, specialised people speak specialised languages. Human rights are technical: they require legal qualification and nuanced reasoning. Standards of proof (especially if we aim for criminal trials) are hard to reach. Second, we have professional ethics. We aim for accuracy, to fight fake news and to make irrefutable claims. We respect our targets and speak to their reason. Third, we get trapped in jargon out of conformity. Since we want to prove ourselves to colleagues or donors, we feel unauthorised to depart from the practice and to use plain language. The last reason is sensitivity: we refrain from unnecessarily shocking people. We use trigger warnings and legalese, rather than concrete words.

But what works for tax lawyers or computer system administrators doesn't work for human rights campaigners. Unlike the former, we claim that our work concerns all humankind – which it does. Hence, we aim to reach everyone, not just fractions of society or specific clients.

The value of clear, plain and concrete language

Our ability to fight back against those who are better at setting agendas, framing issues and defining what's important for ordinary people depends on making our messages difficult to dismiss. There's no secret recipe, but there are tools to convey visual images and the sonorities of

human speech: using words everyone understands, describing events everyone feels concerned by, making our messages not just appealing but pleasant to the ear and obvious to the mind. We should do so and nudge people with euphonious sentences (alliterations, rhymes, and rhythms). For this, linguists can be allies. Humour, too.

Innovations in human rights campaigning ('hope-based' or 'value-based' communications) are on the right diagnostic track. They address failings in campaigning and highlight the importance of clear frames. It is also sensible to abandon the use of negative statements (as in '#DefendersNotCriminals' or '#JournalismIsNotACrime'). As psycholinguist Steven Pinker has shown, these statements have a cognitive cost: when we set statements up as plausible beliefs before knocking them down, many readers get confused. It's counterproductive and dangerous because in the end, some will only remember the 'criminal' part.

Natural prose rather than jargon, plain talk rather than indirect statements, concrete details rather than abstractions are more appealing for any audience.

All writing guides offer similar advice: avoid cluttering, use specific language, make your prose vivid; don't say anything in writing that you wouldn't comfortably say in conversation. Orwell also stressed the value of plain language. He warned against the hallmarks of politicianese that are jargon and euphemisms – often used 'for the defence of the indefensible.'

Saying that language shapes our perception of reality won't reinvent the bicycle. But human rights campaigning will improve its pedal stroke if it remembers that plain writing has a persuasive power. Natural prose rather than jargon, plain talk rather than indirect statements, concrete details rather than abstractions are more appealing for any audience. They elicit emotions, sensations and empathy – precisely what human rights campaigns seek to do.

Campaigning *writ large* (tweets, public advocacy, replies to the media) should therefore talk about abductions instead of 'enforced disappearances', homeless people instead of people 'deprived of their right to housing' and killings instead of 'violations on the right to life'.

The social media trap

In the age of social media, however, avoiding the triple trap of jargon, abstractions and clichés might not be enough. Social media's business model is based on polarisation. Algorithms promote simplistic, sensational contents because they mean more addictive engagement and

more clicks. Social media's incentive structure traps people in cognitive bubbles.

This doesn't mean human rights campaigners should retreat. But this sure means that they should stop preaching to the converted. Rather, they should fine-tune their messages to reach broader audiences. They should talk to people and try to connect with their core beliefs. Most people want tougher border controls? Instead of blaming them, engage them. Craft messages that speak to them. Don't hammer home that 'borders are racist', but show that anyone fleeing war deserves asylum – after all, it could be you and your kids. Show the human sides of it. (And it isn't forbidden to concede that borders should be regulated.)

Human rights messages should be addressed at people who aren't already convinced.

Instead of using concepts, use concrete images. I wouldn't recognise a 'racial justice approach to migration policy' if I saw one on the street. But I would recognise human beings drowning in the sea. I don't understand all implications of the right to a fair trial. But I sure understand – because I can picture it – that taking an innocent in front of a firing squad at 01:00am after a half-hour trial is atrocious.

Human rights messages should be addressed at people who aren't already convinced: what prevents campaigners from directly addressing those they see as 'the other side' and say, 'whether we're conservative or liberal, no one should see their kid starve to death'? Why talk of the 'right to an adequate standard of living' when we can talk of hunger, fear, pain, and shame?

These are recipes worth trying to pop the cognitive bubbles and make human rights campaigning more effective. It isn't easy. But at this point, human rights don't have much more ground to lose anyway.



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