

**Messaging Mobility: Exploring and Creating New Narratives
about Migration and Human Movement in a Changing World**

Final Report

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July 2019

Introduction

Migration and human mobility remain high on international political, policy, and public agendas. The issue has, in part, contributed to major political shifts in Europe, North America, and beyond. Given such global salience, our project ‘Messaging Migration’ aimed to address how the issue is communicated through media, and to explore alternative approaches based in the creative arts. We intentionally situated our research as an inter- and multi-disciplinary enterprise, involving (among other approaches) political science, sociology, migration studies, linguistics, and drama. Not only did we intend to make contributions to substantive questions about which kinds of messages can impact public discussion, but we also wanted our project to engage with deeper issues about which kinds of values might inform those discussions in the first place. Moreover, we wanted to explore different techniques and ways of expressing our findings to wider audiences beyond the conventional formats of academic journal articles—although we acknowledge how these remain important venues for scholarship and researchers’ professional development.

As such, we posed two seemingly simple questions in our original proposal: (1) What would new, ‘effective’ narratives on migration look like, and (2) what values, techniques, or approaches would they invoke? On both questions, our project generated findings and evidence that support some (at this point) tentative conclusions which we will outline later. But, a key message that also emerges from our work is that ‘effectiveness’—and how to achieve it—depends on the objectives and capabilities of messengers, as well as the perspectives of audiences. Therefore, in line with recent communication scholarship, our results do not lead us to advocate for a ‘magic bullet’ approach to talking about migration: one solution will not fit all situations. Rather,

‘effective’ messaging in such polarised and politically fragmented times will likely involve paying closer attention to how, for whom, and in which circumstances information matters for broader public debates.

This report serves as a summary of what we have undertaken, achieved, and learned during this two-year period. To be clear, it is not a detailed report of all of our findings, methodologies, and limitations that we encountered. Rather, it is a relatively high-level description of what has come out of the research project, as well as opportunities that arose during the two-year project period. Wherever possible, we have included footnotes and references to our outputs that give greater depth than what we report here.

The first section presents an account of the main activities and outputs produced, grouped under each broad project ‘stage’. Here, we provide key findings from the research where appropriate. Then, the second section turns attention to the lessons we learned while delivering this project. These range from theoretical and methodological insights related to the research questions, to practical reflections on trying new approaches. Finally, the third section outlines future activities that are already being planned, as well as funding bids that aim to take forward some of this project’s findings.

Activities Undertaken

Stage One: Analysis of British News Coverage of Immigration

The first task in our project was to describe how media talk about immigration. Before suggesting new ways of communicating, we needed to identify existing ways that prominent messengers portray immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and related issues. We narrowed this broad question down to focus on the British national press—a choice

informed by our prior work, the salience of immigration in the British case owing to Brexit, and practical concerns about the size of the dataset. We based our approach in computational and corpus linguistics, a field characterised by finding patterns of word usage in relatively large sets of texts (called ‘corpora’).

Using NexisUK, a digital archival service, we collected immigration-related content in nine British national newspapers as far as they were available from 1985-2015—a 30 year period.¹ In total, the corpus contained 299,428 items. Then, using the Sketch Engine which is a leading web-based platform for organising and handling corpora, we conducted collocational analysis to identify how targeted words like ‘immigrant’ and ‘refugee’ tended to appear with other adjectives and verbs.² Then, building on existing linguistic work by other scholars, we grouped these patterns together into six broad categories: economic/occupational language; criminality and legal status; legislative, policy, and governmental terms; demographic and sociocultural terms; geographical terms; and scale and pace language.³

One key finding particularly informed subsequent stages of the research. Scale and pace language—words that emphasised large numbers of immigrants and asylum-

¹ PI Allen and Project Advisor Scott Blinder analysed a subset of this sample alongside UK government press releases for a separate peer-reviewed journal article. Since that output was not directly related to the questions in this project, it is not included in the final list of outputs.

However, the article is fully open-access and free to read:

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1940161218771897>.

² For more technical detail about how we collected the data and conducted the collocational analysis, see Appendices A and B here: https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Report-Decade_Immigration_British_Press-1.pdf.

³ For more details on this coding scheme, see this working paper:

http://www.jackblumenau.com/aqtac_2017/allen.pdf.

seekers entering the UK, such as ‘mass’, ‘thousands’, and ‘net’ (as in the phrase ‘net migration’)—has quickly risen to be one of the most salient ways of talking about this issue in Britain’s tabloid and broadsheet (quality) news outlets. Quantities, not qualities, tended to be a major way in which newspaper media described immigrants. This is a shift from previous years, where terms related to legal status (‘illegal immigrants’ being most prominent) were far more prevalent.

Stage Two: Experimental Survey Research into Messaging Effects

Having established broad patterns of media coverage around immigration, the second stage of the project used a series of survey experiments to ascertain whether and how differences in messages might change perceptions, attitudes, and policy preferences towards immigrants in the UK. The kinds of messaging approaches we tested were partly informed by the media analysis completed in Stage One, as well as by prior studies and our own experiences in civil society and policy settings. In total, this stage involved three surveys: two which were originally planned, and one more which arose out of a serendipitous encounter.

The first survey experiment, fielded in May-June 2018 by YouGov UK, involved 10,247 UK-born adults. The second survey experiment, fielded in June 2018 also by YouGov UK, involved a nationally-representative sample of 4,445 UK-born adults.⁴ The third survey experiment, fielded in March-April 2019 through Prolific, involved a stratified sample of 3,411 UK-born adults. All of these surveys were approved by the appropriate university ethics committees.

⁴ The full samples were slightly larger, but for the main analyses we excluded respondents who were born outside of the UK. This is because people born abroad might draw upon different sets of experiences that may influence their opinions. In the journal articles, we replicate the analyses with the full samples as well.

In essence, all of these experiments systematically tested different versions of messages, and then measured to what extent (and for which groups) these variations made any difference to respondents' views. Experiment One proposed that describing immigrants using specific words expressing economic and sociocultural features—such as 'skilled', 'Eastern European', or 'young'—in addition to scale and pace language, would change how favourably respondents would view these people. Experiment Two tested whether using numerical supporting information, such as statistics or quantities, would change attitudes compared to personal stories or a mixture of the two approaches. Finally, Experiment Three tested whether messages expressed in textual form, as a series of charts, or as an infographic video would have any effects on immigration attitudes.

Across the experiments, there are several key findings with implications for how messengers might conceptualise and create different kinds of messages about immigration and immigrants. First, scale and pace language did not substantially change public perceptions towards immigrants in either positive or negative directions. Second, numerical forms of evidence had stronger effects than narrative approaches, but only among a narrower set of attitudes and perceptions related to economic aspects of immigration. Third, all forms of information interventions—based in text, charts, and video—made British respondents less likely to support further immigration controls, with charts being slightly more effective than the video.

Why do these findings matter? At a broad level, they show how members of the public can and do respond favourably to new information about immigration, even when that information might run contrary to their previous beliefs. For example, in Experiment Two, some of the largest effects occurred among respondents who voted

‘Leave’ in the 2016 EU Referendum. What our results and designs cannot definitively tell, however, is why this might be the case or how these messages exerted their effects. Perhaps respondents were using the new information as an ‘anchor’ from which they updated their prior attitudes. Or, perhaps they trusted certain kinds of evidence more than others: some scholars, though not all, have argued how numbers are perceived as being more authoritative and credible. Regardless, what is clear is that none of the messages ‘backfired’, or caused people to express even more negative views after engaging with a positive message about immigrants. This offers hope for academics and practitioners who use research evidence in their public engagement activities.

Stage Three: Participatory Research Using the Creative and Dramatic Arts

These experimental findings helped inform some aspects of the third stage of our project. Assuming that information does matter for attitudes, but the modes of communicating that information also have effects, we wanted to explore how techniques that are less-commonly used in social science research might work in practice. Here is where we collaborated with an established company, called actREAL, which translates academic research into creative outputs such as performances, interactive workshops, and scripts for plays. Over the course of three public events in Oxford, a workshop with secondary school-aged students in Bristol, a workshop with academics from the University of Bristol, and an ongoing short-film production, we aimed to experiment with different methods of communicating migration-related research.

The first event, held at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford on 29 September 2017, was part of a larger set of events hosted by the University of Oxford across the

city. Working with actREAL, we transformed some of the media analysis into a series of participatory, multi-sensory activities for members of the public. These included a physical ‘word forest’ containing frequently-used descriptors of immigrants, and an interactive television broadcast that allowed participants to change channels that corresponded with different decades of British news coverage. Over 150 people engaged with our series of activities at this event.

The second and third events were part of the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)’s Festival of Social Science, a national event aimed at sharing social research with the wider public. Again working with actREAL, we designed an interactive performance on the theme of communicating with quantitative and visual information—a choice informed by some of our previous experiments. It included a mixture of dialogued performance, humour, and participation by audience members. Over the course of two evenings in November 2018, actREAL put on two performances, reaching about 30-40 people in total.

actREAL also led a workshop with a group of Year 13 Sociology students from a local Bristol school. This group consisted of 13 young women and their teacher. The aim of the workshop was to start a conversation starting from participants’ own diverse stories and experiences to reflect about migration generally, as well as how media represent migrants. This involved a series of interactive activities, discussion, exercises and games over three hours, which included: writing their own stories, interviewing each other, listening to soundscapes, guessing the validity of headlines, discussing the language used in sample articles, considering historical definitions of ‘immigrants’ as well as the meanings and connotations of currently-used words, as well as examining their own interpretations of the role of the media in the larger migration debate.

We also held a one-day workshop with Bristol academics working on migration. This event aimed to explore how to deal with difficult conversations about migration, race, and racism through role-play activities and exercises. There were ten participants from the department of Sociology and Politics, and the workshop was led by trained facilitator Pete Cranston, who drew on the learning from the previous schools workshop and discussions with actREAL.

Finally, again using the skills of actREAL team members, we are now finalising a short film that uses the ‘George and the Dragon’ legend to raise awareness and discussion about migration issues. This story is particularly relevant for talking about mobility and identity in the British context. First, it is a story that resonates with Christian traditions—and in Britain, is marked with an annual holiday—although its roots are distinctly pre-Christian. Second, St George himself was born in what is now Turkey, although this part of history is often not remembered in contemporary retellings. This captures an aspect of how migration and ‘foreignness’ is not always present in public understandings. We anticipate using this film in future teaching and public outreach activities.

Summary of Activities, Presentations, and Other Outputs

Type	Event or Venue
Conference Presentation	2017 Text as Data Workshop, London School of Economics
	2018 European Political Science Association
	2018 Interpretivist Political Science
	2018 International Communication Association
	2018 Making a Difference Through Impact, Oxford
	2018 Immigration, Integration, and Social Cohesion (IMISCOE)
	2018 Researching UN (Text Analysis)
	2018 Elections, Public Opinion, and Parties (EPOP)
	2019 European Political Science Association
	2019 Midwest Political Science Association
	2019 Council for Europeanist Studies
Invited Presentation	2018 UN International Migrants Day Event
	2018 IOM Research Seminar
	2019 Rotterdam CrossMigration Consortium Meeting
	2019 Oslo MIGNEX Consortium Meeting
Public Arts Event	2017 Curiosity Carnival, Ashmolean Museum
	2018 Festival of Social Science, Old Fire Station (x2)
Academic Article	American Journal of Political Science (under review)
	The Journal of Politics (under review)
	Political Communication (in preparation)
	British Journal of Political Science (in preparation)
Other	2018 Schools Workshop (Bristol)
	2018 Researchers Workshop (Bristol)
	Short film on the theme of 'George and the Dragon' (in preparation)

Lessons Learned

In addition to the substantive findings, we also learned important practical and methodological lessons throughout the project. Some of these we have communicated through conferences, such as the 2018 Impact event at Oxford, while others have informed our thinking in more subtle ways. First, on the creative arts side, we had to learn how to be flexible in our expectations and delivery. For example, the original plan as described in our interim report at the end of Year One was to use the George and the Dragon legend in an interactive art performance in Bristol. However, due to external funding issues, this event did not go ahead as planned. Therefore, we had to shift our focus to another kind of output—in this case, a short film.

Second, we found measuring the impact of our dramatic arts-based interventions to be a difficult task. This is not a challenge which is unique to our topic or context. Yet, it did give us the opportunity to question what researchers precisely mean when they seek ‘impact’ or ‘public engagement’. Feedback from our public events suggested that participants had a greater awareness of migration issues, or had re-considered their beliefs and practices. These kinds of outcomes, while distinct from attitude change, are still important pre-requisite steps towards more open discussions among people who may not agree on political consequential issues like immigration. Moreover, the methods of our engagements—participatory, arts-based activities—revealed how it is possible to use emotion as a way to access and investigate beliefs. This is an avenue that we hope to pursue in greater depth in the future.

Third, as most researchers would express, our initial findings led to other kinds of questions which we did not anticipate answering at the beginning. The third survey experiment is an example of this. Only after sharing the results of the second survey at a

conference did we become aware of other researchers working on a related question about the role of visual communication in shaping immigration attitudes. The resulting experiment, where we compared the three modes of communicating information, extended our findings to new media and new messaging modes.

Follow-On Activities and Future Directions

This project provided the time and resources for us to consider an important issue. The results and networks produced by this grant have led us to consider future plans that extend and expand upon the activities we have completed.

Activities Planned after the Project End Date

Although the project formally ended in April 2019, there are several activities that we plan on completing. On the academic side, we plan to continue publishing results in peer-reviewed journals. Some of these, as indicated in the earlier table of outputs, are already under review. We also will continue presenting results at national conferences, including at the Voluntary Sector Studies Network (VSSN) Annual Conference, and the Elections, Public Opinion, and Parties Annual Conference, both in September 2019. Meanwhile, we will continue working with actREAL in producing and publicising the short film later in 2019. We are currently discussing how this could be used by A-level Sociology teachers.

Additional Funding (Secured and Planned)

We have also been considering additional sources of funding to build upon this project. We have already been successful in bidding for a small grant from Oxford's John Fell

Fund, which will investigate how visual modes of communicating migration may impact public attitudes. Other sources in the future may involve the UK Economic and Social Research Council, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and local or national charitable foundations. There are also opportunities for creative arts engagement through Oxford's Impact Acceleration Accounts (IAA) scheme, which funds public engagement and impact work, as well as The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities (TORCH) which supports inter- and multi-disciplinary initiatives.