

Communicating Across Disciplines: How to Make Justice Matter to All

Meeting Summary

This document is an overview of the key takeaways from the panel discussion, “Communicating Across Disciplines: How to Make Justice Matter to All,” held at the United Nations (UN) Headquarters in New York and online on September 12, 2025. A full video recording of the event is available [here](#).

Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies (Pathfinders), in its capacity as co-secretariat of the Justice Action Coalition, together with the Permanent Mission of Costa Rica to the United Nations and the Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to the United Nations, hosted a hybrid meeting on **Communicating Across Disciplines: How to Make Justice Matter to All** on September 12, 2025. This event was held on the sidelines of the 80th session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) and included diverse attendance from governments, civil society, the multilateral system, and academia. The meeting focused on providing tools and strategies to communicate about the importance of access to justice in a way that resonates with those who outside their immediate communities and broadens the movement to achieve equal access to people-centered justice for all as reflected in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16.3.

KEY MESSAGES

- We have to understand the moral foundations, emotional hooks, and underlying stories that resonate with our audiences if we are to translate values into action.
- When communicating online, we have to be mindful of perception gaps, distrust about narratives, and an overload of information.
- We need to recognize that laws alone are not enough; we also have to change culture.
- Cultural mindsets are deeply held ways of seeing the world and they shape how we think about issues like access to justice. If we want to create a more just world, then our communications strategies need to change cultural mindsets.
- Find unlikely allies and “Trojan horses” in advocacy and simplify your stories so people can [emotionally] connect with them.
- Ensure communications staff have meaningful time with researchers and content experts so that the deployment of messaging and communications are done strategically.
- In settings where tensions are high (i.e., post-conflict contexts), effective communications strategies need to address concerns about manipulation, and counter dehumanizing content by creating a shared humanity worldview.

At the onset of the discussion, **Ambassador Maritza Chan of Costa Rica** emphasized the role of access to justice to support the enjoyment of rights in daily life. She stated that, “access to justice allows people to move through their lives freely, maintain their livelihoods and wellbeing, and enjoy their economic, social, and political rights prescribed by the states.” **Ambassador Katja Lasseur of the Kingdom of the Netherlands** echoed this sentiment and emphasized the importance of learning to communicate the importance of access to justice outside of the justice community. She said, “the rule of law guarantees we can exercise the freedoms that people fought for, and it protects these freedoms from being abused.

It's essential that we all make an effort to put an end to all the jargon and reconnect justice with people."

With this sentiment in mind, **Fernando Marani, Program Director, Justice, Inclusion, and Equality with Pathfinders**, provided an overview on people-centered justice before turning to a panel discussion among experts in social impact campaigns, narrative building, and strategic communications. Panelists included:

- **Stephen Friedman.** Former President of MTV; Advisor to media organizations, foundations and NGOs on storytelling for social change; Adjunct Professor, Columbia University SIPA; Board of Directors for the Genocide Survivors Foundation, All Out, and More In Common.
- **Roberta Braga.** Founder and Executive Director, Digital Democracy Institute of the Americas (DDIA); Fmr. Director of Counter-Disinformation Strategies at Equis Institute; Fmr. Deputy Director for Programs and Outreach at Atlantic Council's Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center; Latinas Cyber and WOMCY "Top Women in Cybersecurity Americas" 2023.
- **Thomas Coombes.** Founder, Hope-based communications; Fmr. Head of Brand and Deputy Communications Director, Amnesty International.
- **Clara Blustein Lindholm.** Director of Research Interpretation, Framework Institute Culture Change Project.
- **Amanda Alampi.** Director, Audience Engagement, Human Rights Watch; Part-time Instructor, Communications & Media Studies, Fordham University.
- **(Moderator) Nate Edwards.** Program Officer, Justice for All, Pathfinders, Center on International Cooperation at New York University.

Over the course of the panel discussion and subsequent question and answer segment, panelists shared the following lessons.

1. We have to understand the moral foundations, emotional hooks, and underlying stories that resonate with our audiences if we are to translate values into action.

It is our job as policymakers and communicators to train our emotional intelligence so we can better connect with people in all walks of life. We need to tailor our messages not just for the activists and those politically inclined, but also for the 50-70 percent of the population who are not actively engaged in the political issue(s) we seek to address. They need the message to relate to their lived experience. In the policy space, we often come at issues like access to justice from a righteous, moral outrage, but that is not necessarily what will resonate with our audiences. Sometimes it is the unexpected thing that will mobilize masses. We have to listen and understand what matters to them, if we want to make our messages impactful.

When resources allow, we need to do public opinion research and understand how people think and feel. We need to go beyond defining people by demographics alone, but understand how to target behavior. Then, we can define what the behavior is we want to see changed because we have identified the foundational threshold.

2. When communicating online, we have to be mindful of perception gaps, distrust about narratives, and an overload of information.

People perceive the world is more divided than it actually is, and they have a hard time deciding what is true and false when consuming content online. People also have especially high distrust of those with the most starkly opposite viewpoints from their own. To get through to people in our online content, policymakers and communications experts should consider the following:

- a. **Respect people's intelligence.** Most people do think about social and political issues thoughtfully, but they may just be prioritizing different things. In the language of content, respect people's intelligence.
- b. **People value evidence in content.** They do not trust everybody. When sources are cited, it helps the perception of credibility.
- c. **Local connections are important.** Connecting to the community's issues or being geographically adjacent helps build trust with audiences.
- d. **Integrating joy and entertainment into content is important.** In a world full of doom and gloom, people are hungry for happy and joyful content.
- e. **People value informational content.** They want to feel empowered to take action and do things on their own.

3. We need to recognize that laws alone are not enough; we also have to change culture.

Thomas Coombes said, "hope is the idea that tomorrow can be better if we take action." We need to create more hope and less fear if we are to have democratic and human rights-based societies. Drawing on research in neuroscience, we have learned that if we want change, we have to put the ideas of what that change looks like in front of people. We often focus on the problem, but we need to talk about the world we want to see.

To do this, we need to listen to people and understand the attitudes, behaviors, and values needed to achieve justice. This also requires defining what we mean by justice and saying what effective people-centered justice looks like in practice. This definition needs to originate from communities themselves. It is not law that helps people, it's people that help people, using the law. Therefore, we need to translate our ideas about what justice is into actions that people can do. We need to think of kindness and empathy as muscles that we can train through messaging. This will require the use of social and emotional intelligence to achieve change.

4. Cultural mindsets are deeply held ways of seeing the world and they shape how we think about issues like access to justice. If we want to create a more just world, then our communications strategies need to change cultural mindsets.

Cultural mindsets can create obstacles for understanding. For example, research has found that people assume the idea of “justice” refers to crime and the criminal justice systems, and they assume the law is for lawyers. When people think about a legal system they think about an unfair system, that the elites have rigged against them, and that the odds are stacked against people without resources or minorities. That helps build urgency around change—recognizing problems—but if people see the problem is too big to solve or that they do not have power to change the system, it can create disengagement. Justice is an abstract concept, so people disengage when they hear about rule of law because they think they do not have a stake in it. Two key ways to combat this disengagement include:

1. Focus on what society stands to gain if we improve access to justice.

In communications outputs, talk about what we stand to gain, not just what we stand to lose. Say that we can make the system fairer, more just, and that can make the world a better place.

2. Always offer concrete examples.

Explain what the concept means in practice and connect it to relatable examples drawing from people's everyday lives—the more contextualized and applicable to your audience's experiences, the better.

5. Find unlikely allies and “Trojan horses” in advocacy and simplify your stories so people can connect with them.

For example, Human Rights Watch works with television and film writers to engage with people where they are through highly consumed stories and pop culture. This can pave the way for narrative change over time. We have to find stories that demonstrate how we are more connected than different and

that offer pathways to justice. People can relate to these stories. By putting these stories into popular culture, we can create “mind bugs” that facilitate change over time. Rather than making the issue more complex, we need to focus on the simple stories and tell them well.

6. Ensure communications staff have meaningful time with researchers and content experts.

The content we create is only impactful when it is seen and taken up by the right audience. Even amidst the resource and time constraints that we face, the deployment of messaging and communications need to be done strategically. Therefore, when content experts create organizational and political strategies with timelines, key moments, and key messages, communications strategies need to be baked into them.

7. In settings where tensions are high (i.e., post-conflict contexts), effective communications strategies need to address concerns about manipulation, and counter dehumanizing content by creating a shared humanity worldview.

Addressing manipulation can include using the “inoculation strategy” (i.e., anti-smoking campaigns), in which messaging tells people that they are being duped and those messages explain the “who” and “why.” Alongside this tactic—especially when distrust is high—our strategies need to bridge gaps between communities by explaining the ideas people already agree on. Finally, we must also counter dehumanizing content with rehumanizing content. This means proactively creating positive content that shows communities coming together. In doing so, story by story, we can build a shared humanity world view—the story we tell ourselves about human nature.

If you would like to further discuss the contents of this meeting summary, the people-centered justice movement, or the Justice Action Coalition, please reach out to Nate Edwards, Program Officer with the Pathfinders Justice for All program at the Center on International Cooperation at New York University (nate.edwards@nyu.edu).