



Stories of
Change



Working with the Movable Middle

Lessons from SCI's Stories of Change Case Studies

Migration Narrative Project

Written by
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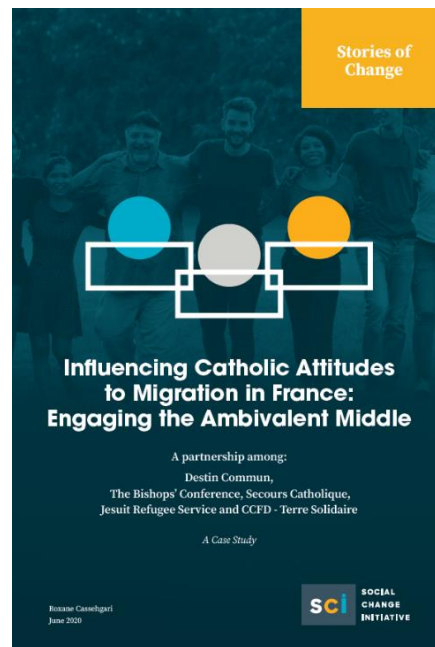


Introduction

How the Case Studies Came to Be

Social Change Initiative collaborates with activists, policy makers and funders to deliver lasting social change. In 2015, at the height of tensions around the arrival of increased numbers of refugees and migrants into Europe, we were asked if we could help to tackle the pervasive, negative narratives about migration and migrants. In response we were able to mobilize resources to establish the Migration Narrative Project (MNP).

As part of the MNP, Social Change Initiative commissioned two case studies to recount the experience of our partner organizations working to change two different migration debates. In Germany, JUMA and ICPA (International Centre for Policy Advocacy) built a public campaign to change attitudes of middle audiences towards Muslims living in Germany. In France, Destin Commun and four French Catholic organizations worked to change Catholics' views on migration. The case studies describe the process of engaging middle audiences as well as the lessons learned. While these organizations tailored processes to their experience and context, a set of common criteria seemed to emerge and form the basis of a methodology to engage with middle audiences.



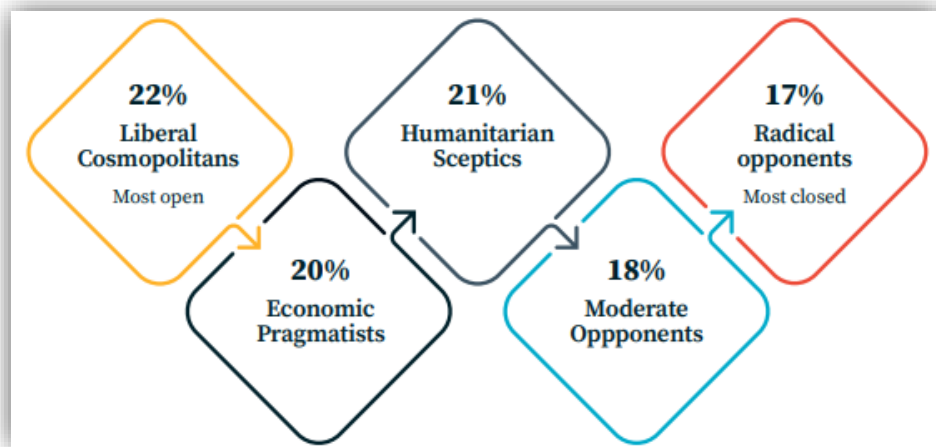
Click on the cover image to download a copy of the case study

What is the middle approach?

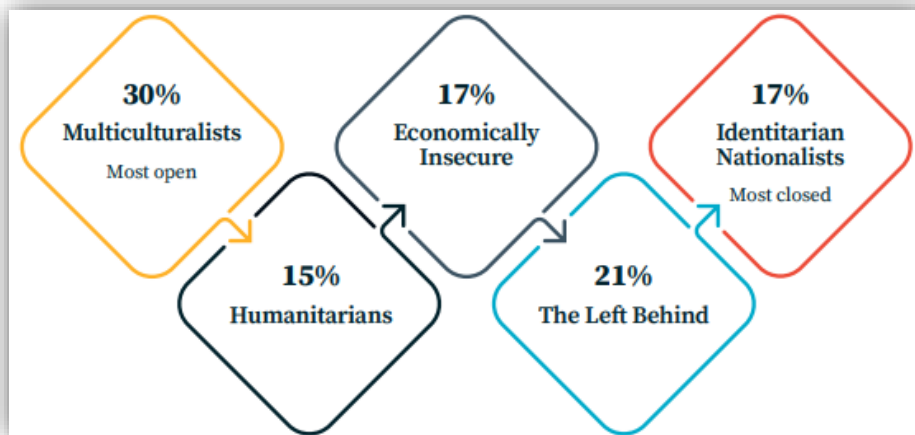
The concept of the 'movable middle' originates from segmentation research on public opinion. In the migration debate, the movable middle is a part of the population who can be in favour of welcoming and integrating migrants and refugees, and at the same time, feel resistant and hesitant about migration. For this reason, it is also known as the ambivalent or the anxious middle. Sometimes, their anxiety is driven by economic precarity or the fear of their cultural identity disappearing. Most importantly, the middle presents a unique opportunity. Their ambivalence means they are susceptible to move towards more openness and tolerance. Targeting the movable middle is about finding the mechanisms to help the middle move in this direction.

However, engaging with the movable middle is challenging, because it invites dialogue with an audience who can appear close-minded, intolerant, and unwilling to accept that migrants and refugees can integrate and be part of society.

Public opinion segments ranging from open to closed views - Germany



Public opinion segments ranging from open to closed views - France



Why work this way?

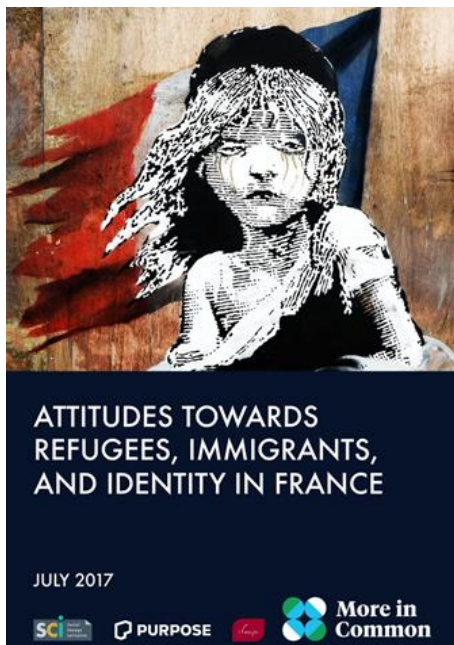
Something different needed to be done

The organizations in these case studies observed their work was achieving limited impact in a context where the migration debate was increasingly being dominated by anti-migrant narratives, particularly regarding Muslim migrants. They realised that they were not reaching beyond usual audiences. Instead, they were losing people whose views had hardened under the influence of far-right narratives. They needed a fresh approach.

Research to understand the audience

Audience research is the starting point. As a first step, the organizations sought to understand the current state of the migration debate. *What are the different opinions? What are the main narratives shaping the debate? What are they missing?*

They relied on segmentation research conducted by More in Common in France and Germany, with input and support from SCI. The research became a turning point. It highlighted the existence of the middle and provided important information about the different groups of public opinion (segments), and what drives their attitudes on migration: values, world views, anxiety, age, income etc. The organizations also conducted their own research with what was available to them: internal surveys, social media analysis, etc.



Click on the cover image to download a copy of the research report

Moving the middle

What does it really mean?

Targeting the middle to change the migration debate ultimately seeks to create the narratives that will convince more people, beyond those who already hold open views, that migrants can integrate and be part of society. It means removing the middle from the influence of far-right narratives and activating their inclinations to welcome migrants.

The two case studies reveal how the organizations established favourable conditions for this dialogue. It is also worth mentioning that the teams who worked on these projects learned the importance of shifting their own biases and perceptions of the middle to be able to speak to this particular audience.



How the middle thinks can be surprising. Knowing your audience is crucial for communications work. *“We think of the middle as being quite far over to the right rather than as people with complicated feelings and opinions who are very affected by the media that they hear and by populist politicians that speak to them.”*



From research to action: methodological approach

Make the research accessible, bring the data to life

Research needs to be made accessible and tangible to allow campaigners and advocates in social change organizations to realize how relevant data is to their work. This can be done by illustrating the middle segments with caricatural portraits of people who are easily recognizable and who embody specific values and ambivalence. Running focus groups with members of the middle is another way to bring the data to life. Often, ‘meeting’ the middle in focus groups or through profiles is a turning point for advocates who can finally see the segments as real people – possibly like people they already know.

Pick the right audience

The middle is not a homogenous group. The segmentation research often identifies groups that differ in the extent to which they are open and favourable to migration. Their ambivalence and their reasons for feeling anxious about migration are also different. They can therefore respond and react differently to the same narratives. What these two case studies prove is that it is important to target the correct middle group; meaning the one that holds overlapping values with the organization doing the messaging. Importantly, the appropriate middle audience is the one that does not require activists to compromise their values and mission.

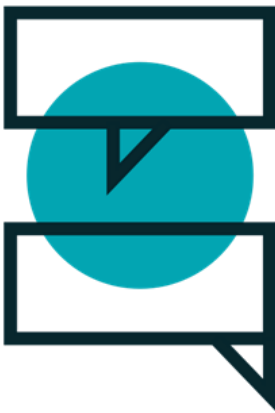
Find common values with the middle

Moving the middle means communicating with values that speak to those who are conflicted. Messages that seek to generate outrage or compassion, that invoke universalist language or that rely on Us vs Them narratives are likely to turn the middle away. At the same time, advocates need to stay true to their own values. What is needed is to find a set of common values shared by both the middle segments and the pro-migrant messengers so that a dialogue can happen, and opinions can shift. The common values will underpin the messages and actions targeting the middle.

Create actions and messages

The next step is to create messages: campaign visuals (posters, videos, photos), slogans, etc. And/or to develop actions that seek to engage actively the middle: events, gatherings, etc. These interventions are guided by the overlapping values that have previously been identified.

Important insights on messaging learned from the case studies:



1. *Avoid extremes.* Polarizing messages like Us vs Them narratives tend to turn the middle audiences away as they avoid conflict and taking positions. Instead, the emphasis should be put on what people share as opposed to what divides them. Scenes of daily life, mixed groups, daily interactions reassure the middle about society's future.
2. *Resonance and dissonance.* Create sufficient resonance with the middle so that they can be receptive to the messages, but sufficient dissonance that it challenges their perceptions. For example: a scene depicts a female medical student in a German hospital (resonance). She is Muslim and wears a headscarf, thus challenging the conception that Islam is not compatible with Western society (dissonance).
3. *Show don't tell.* Negating anti-migrant narratives or conveying too-positive stories about migrants can backfire. The middle can react negatively to messages that seem to tell them what to think. Instead, these audiences want to see stories about migrants and refugees in everyday situations without necessarily talking about migration.

Find the right messenger

A message has a low chance of resonating when it lacks an effective messenger. The two projects described in the case studies show how the organizations discovered that their own staff were often not the best messengers to speak to a middle audience. The right messenger needs to inspire trust, which means it is often someone who shares a bond of culture, religion, or geographical proximity. Messengers need be authentic and sincere.



Test. Test. Test.

Evaluation is everything when creating change campaigns with new audiences and new values-based messaging content. Testing should happen at multiple stages while developing content. Both focus groups and online testing have an important role to play. The case studies make it clear that the practitioners in these projects came to rely heavily on testing because they understood that since they themselves were not middle audiences, the only way to be sure their campaign messages reached the middle, was to test them with the target audience. Further, targeting the middle is relatively a new concept in social change, and it can prove challenging to convince people in the sector that it is relevant. Evaluation is important to ensure working this way has impact on the migration debate and then to convince others that it works. Happily, the case studies show clearly that there is a middle, it's movable and that there are tested ways of reaching it.

Targeting the middle: an organizational perspective

Organizational cultural shift

Working with middle audiences can challenge traditional methods of social change work. Organizations are asked to change the way they communicate, the language they use and the narratives they have defended for many years. For many organizations, this may prompt resistance whether internally or by members of their base. People may feel that their work is being questioned, and that they are asked to compromise their positions for an audience that they feel are hostile to them or the people they represent. Organizational leadership must be on board with the approach and provide support. Importantly, the entire organization needs to understand the implications of addressing the middle and be willing to engage and experiment.



Research results led to a self-transformation process within the partner organizations: *“We figured out that if we wanted to change attitudes about migration, we would need first to shift the attitudes of the activists. It was quite intense and emotional. People would ask themselves: ‘as a grassroots volunteer who’s always been engaged in politics, or as a white, middle class person from the urban suburbs, how am I perceived? How do I myself create tension and close the debate? Do I have biases? How can I change my attitude so I can let the other change their attitude too?’”*

Sequencing

The organizations in the case studies stress that moving middle audiences will take time. Changing the migration debate, happens in a sequence. Advocates must learn and adapt as they go. Only certain narratives, at first, will be able to be introduced – those that speak directly to the middle audience. As these narratives make their way and spread, more open and pointed narratives can progressively be introduced. The process is described as broadening the narrative change space. The more these narratives take space in the migration debate, the more it becomes possible to influence legislation, policies, and practices.



A decision to be made. Do we want to do this?

Because targeting the middle is a long process which can be emotionally challenging, will likely meet resistance and requires changing deeply engrained methods, organizations who consider this work have to ask themselves if they are ready and willing to do so. They will have to assess whether it is appropriate for their mission and whether they risk contradicting dramatically the work they have done with their base audience. Each organization must decide for themselves. Some of the questions to be asked include: Does your audience already include members of the middle? Can you find common values upon which to message? Many organizations may find that this approach is not for them, and that's OK. Others will decide that working to activate solidarity, open the thinking and reduce anxiety of a significant segment of society is worth the challenge and that the potential benefits outweigh the difficulties.

Acknowledgements

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Design by Dr. Rachel Williamson

Author

Roxane Cassehgari is a narrative change researcher and a human rights lawyer. She moved from law to narrative change in the hope of finding solutions to the global rollback of human rights. She has investigated the opportunities and challenges that the field of narrative change presents for social change advocates and philanthropy. In 2019, she organized an international convening on narrative change approaches in times of rising populism. As a lawyer, Roxane has worked in various areas of international human rights law. She was an Aryeh Neier fellow for the Open Society Justice Initiative where she supported human rights litigation and advocacy efforts. Roxane also worked on transitional justice issues for the International Center for Transitional Justice. She received her LL.M. from Columbia Law School and holds a dual law degree from Cambridge University (UK) and Pantheon-Assas (France). She is a licensed New York attorney and is currently based in Paris.