



Making headlines

Getting migrant voices into the media: a toolkit



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Migrant Voice works to find new ways of influencing media coverage and public opinion on migration. Our ground-breaking approaches have one common ingredient: letting migrants speak for themselves.

This toolkit shares the lessons learned: why some initiatives failed and others succeeded. It focuses on one experiment – our Meet a Migrant project, which pioneered small, informal meetings on a specific issue or policy between journalists and affected migrants.

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Introduction

Who is Migrant Voice?

Migrant Voice is a migrant-led organisation established to develop the skills, capacity and confidence of members of migrant communities, including asylum seekers and refugees. We work to amplify migrant voices and increase their representation in the media and public life. Through three general elections, the EU referendum and Brexit negotiations, and a hostile environment for migrants from parts of the media, Migrant Voice has been trying to bring previously unrepresented migrant voices into the debate.

The “Meet a Migrant” project

“Meet a Migrant” pioneered small, informal meetings on a specific issue between a selected group of journalists and affected migrants. We held ten sessions in two years alongside other media projects. We focused on issues raised by migrants we work with.

We trained and supported the migrants on how the media works, on influencing public attitudes, and how best to tell their stories. We offered journalists a package including case studies, background briefing on relevant policies, and Migrant Voice’s own position or recommendations. Our aims were to:

- ensure that migrants are more confident and skilled at telling their own stories in the media
- connect journalists with migrants to hear first-hand accounts and improve knowledge, leading to more accurate reporting
- put migrants’ stories and issues on the agenda, in order to effect change

1. Refugee integration

The first meeting brought together 10 migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, the majority of whom were recently arrived Syrian asylum seekers, and journalists from BBC TV, The Telegraph, the Guardian, The Independent, and the Wall Street Journal online.

The Syrians, who included builders, academics and former high-ranking army officers, spoke about their journeys to Britain, the asylum process, the problems they face, and what they think would assist their integration. The journalists introduced themselves and asked questions, which started a two-hour conversation.



Almost all the journalists subsequently interviewed one of the Syrians they met. Some of the reports included a quote from Migrant Voice. The BBC TV, radio and online news story included an interview with our director and a call to the UK Government to assist in developing more effective integration strategies.

All the broadcast and published reports reflected the issues raised at the meeting. We have kept contact with most journalists and subsequently offered them other stories. Migrant Voice's report on the meeting was shared with the Mayor of London's Refugee Advisory Group, and a number of councils in London and Scotland.

2. Asylum seekers (West Midlands)



Journalists from Sky News, Channel 4, BBC West Midlands and BBC Inside Out met 11 asylum seekers and discussed a wide range of issues, including their experiences with the application process, the ban on work, and the inadequacy of services accessible by applicants waiting for a decision.

The discussion was animated but we realised that there was a gap between our aim of generating discussion on the unfairness of the asylum process and the journalists' interest on why each individual had fled their country and why they could not return home.

In addition, the variety and complexity of the asylum seekers' experiences made it difficult for journalists to establish clear-cut stories. This was the most challenging session, but although it produced no media coverage, we learned a great deal. For example, we intervened to stop a story because of its angle – a criminal gang producing fraudulent passports – which would have shifted the spotlight onto organised crime. We were able to act because of careful checks with journalists over potential angles.

3. EU referendum impact

This session was arranged as a picnic where Europeans resident in the UK could air views on the then-impending EU referendum. No journalists attended as the event took place the weekend following the murder of Jo Cox MP, after which campaigns were suspended.

Other possible factors were that editors may have considered the event too “soft” to allocate a reporter; because covering a picnic takes time with no guarantee of a story; and because weekends are bad for media events. Much work went into the preparation. It proved to be a lesson on how external events can derail the best-laid plans, and the importance in media training of making it clear to participants that media may sometimes fail to turn up.



4. EU nationals

Migrants from 10 EU countries discussed their experiences, feelings, plans and hopes a year after the referendum. Because of the calling of a snap general election immediately before the meeting, only three journalists attended. Again, events outside our control affected turnout, but this also worked to our advantage as we could give the event additional news value by linking the issues to the election.

Journalists attended from The Telegraph, The Times and the Evening Standard. Those who could not attend were briefed on the discussion and followed up, resulting in a feature on BBC Stories, and a London Live interview with one of the migrants who took part.

Another activity in London dealt with the impact of Brexit on health and wellbeing, and led to an op-ed in The Independent and an Observer report. The links built with journalists produced further coverage on Brexit-related issues the following week.

5. Dublin Regulation

This meeting was part of Migrant Voice's campaign against the Dublin Regulation (which determines the EU member state examining an asylum claim, usually the claimant's arrival point). Here we launched our report into the Dublin Regulation's impact.

Again, care was taken to brief both sets of participants in advance. This is particularly important for journalists with a story such as Dublin, which can be seen as "technical" or complex rather than straightforward human interest.



Few attended the meeting; instead journalists tended to contact us individually to conduct interviews with affected people. We also provided them with our report, including testimonies and recommendations. We had extended articles in the Guardian and BuzzFeed and other coverage in specialist and overseas outlets.

The interviews helped us launch our campaign. We secured a joint statement of support from Labour, the Green Party and the Scottish National Party. The SNP later included a commitment to review Dublin in its election manifesto. We also took the campaign to Brussels, working with the RISE network of European refugee-led organisations, and meeting with an adviser to the EU's Dublin Regulation rapporteur and an MEP working on the Regulation. We have called on the EU to drop the Dublin Regulation and replace it with a single European asylum application system.

6. Refugee family reunion (London & Glasgow)

Our aim was to provide concrete examples of refugee families divided by immigration bureaucracy. We highlighted contributory factors such as legal costs and unrealistically detailed demands for evidence by refugees entitled to be reunited with their families. Many of the refugees had fled war and persecution and made arduous and dangerous journeys.

Considerable coverage in a range of media resulted from these meetings, with migrants expressing satisfaction with the publicity generated and journalists with the stories obtained.

Some media organisations, including ITV, said they were unable to attend a meeting to explore rather than cover a story: instead, they selected a migrant from the information provided by Migrant Voice and we helped arrange interviews.

At one of the Meet a Migrant meetings it became clear that some senior journalists disliked competing to choose the person they felt had the “best” story. As a result of this experience, we started matching journalists with refugees and migrants before meetings. These meetings linked up with a joint campaign by 200 faith leaders who called on the government to do more to unite Syrians and other refugees with their families.

Coverage from our Scottish session included multiple BBC Scotland pieces (broadcast and online) and a Daily Record report, plus ITV, Sputnik and the Belfast Telegraph. Follow-up reporting included ITV Good Morning Britain, MailOnline and BT News.



7. Integration and sport

The Great Get Together (GGT) was a national event aimed at bringing people together, in memory of Labour MP Jo Cox. We put on a football event with refugee teams. We worked with GGT organisers and Premiership team West Ham, to get media attention through two hot topics – football and refugees – and open up discussions on integration and belonging in everyday life.

We expected to benefit from GGT media activities, but overall results were less than justified the time required to organise a big event. However, the migrant footballers enjoyed themselves and several were interviewed on London Live, speaking movingly both about their life in UK and about Jo Cox. We and the players also met the Mayor of London. This was an imaginative attempt to try a different format, but proved too unfocused to be entirely effective.



8. Family migration rules

The event was timed to coincide with the fifth anniversary of the implementation of changes in the family migration rule, which introduced restrictions, including an income threshold.

Many members were keen to speak on this issue, but journalists preferred not to attend a meeting, and the anniversary was also the topic of an event in Parliament at which journalists had access to more people affected by the policy. Instead of a meeting we pitched members' stories which resulted in an interview in The Independent, and two other pieces quoting several members' experiences.

Other media campaigns



Karin Goodwin

Irene Clennell



Sometimes, a single powerful story to which large numbers of people can relate has more impact than a batch of stories. So when Irene Clennell explained her situation to Migrant Voice, we saw how her story could capture the experience of thousands of others and highlight the need for policy change.

We interviewed Irene for our website in 2016, months before she became a cause celebre: after 27 years

married to a British citizen and with two British children and a British grandchild, she was told by the Home Office that she did not have the right to remain and was detained and deported to Singapore.

During her detention in Scotland we secured coverage on BBC Scotland and BuzzFeed, which ensured even wider coverage when she was deported. Subsequently we arranged access to her, generated articles, issued statements, gave interviews on her situation and on family policies and called for change. All national print and broadcast media covered the story, and BBC News, ITV, C4, the Guardian, and The Sun as well as regional media such as Tyne & Wear TV, BBC Newcastle, BBC Look North, the Chester le-Street Advertiser, and others carried our quotes or requested interviews.

As a result of the extensive media coverage politicians came out in support and a YouGov poll showed two-thirds of Britons supported Irene's right to stay, including 50% of UKIP voters. The surge in public support led to a crowdfunding campaign that raised £60,000 for legal fees to bring her back home.

"I really appreciate the work Migrant Voice is doing to help people like me," Irene told us. "Without them, I don't think my story would have gone far, or that I would be back home."

Life jackets

In September 2016, we took part in organising a stunt involving the display of thousands of life jackets in Parliament Square to raise awareness of migrant deaths in the Mediterranean and to call for safe routes.

Co-organisers were the UN refugee agency, a range of NGOs including the International Rescue Committee, World Vision and Doctors Without Borders, and the advertising agency Snappin' Turtle, which led the initiative.

The event – which attracted celebrities such as actress Juliet Stevenson, MPs and members of the public – preceded the UN Migration Summit in New York and generated widespread print and broadcast coverage. Migrant Voice itself was mentioned in reports in Time, Reuters, Huffington Post, The Daily Mirror and The Sun. Our director was interviewed by ABC, the BBC, BuzzFeed, LBC, London Live and Sky. Two of our members were also interviewed.

This event harnessed a powerful image to shock the public into and raise awareness of the enormity of the perilous situation in the Mediterranean and galvanise public support for legal routes. In this instance the encounter between refugees and journalists occurred in public view, amidst a sea of life jackets, rather than in an office.



Key lessons



Preparing the pitch

Your unique selling point

The Meet a Migrant format works best when it deals with topics that few other organisations are tackling, and when providing unique access for the media to relevant individuals and groups. At the time of the meeting on Syrian refugees meeting, Syrian migrants were a new group in the country and few journalists had met them.

Find a peg

Our stories worked better when we were able to attach “news pegs” such as a forthcoming meeting or an anniversary, which enabled us – and journalists – to plan ahead. Our EU referendum anniversary meeting was linked with an offer to meet migrants whose health or wellbeing had been affected by the Brexit vote. News pegs can also be a fresh angle on an ongoing story or a quick response to a recent event. When a snap election was called during the preparations for our EU roundtable, we added a “Brexit and the election” angle.

Personalising the message

It is essential that people affected by an issue be heard when trying to create change. These individuals have first-hand experience of how the issue affects their lives, so their testimony has impact. The media is always looking for a “human interest” angle, and readers, listeners, and viewers relate more strongly to individuals’ experiences than to broad policy generalisations. For example, polling and focus groups on refugee issues show that refugees and aid workers are more trusted than celebrities and politicians.

Cause and effect

The most fruitful encounters between migrants and journalists occur when the issue raised and the call for change are crystal clear, as in the life jacket action. Issue: migrant deaths on dangerous sea journeys. Change advocated: establishment of safe routes.

Journalists want a story, not a chat

Journalists are busy and under pressure, and so are the news editors who send them on assignments, and they enjoy their time off. Avoid staging events at weekends or on public holidays.

Provide full packages

We were more successful getting the Meet a Migrant stories and issues covered when we provided journalists with a package of information: people affected by the topic and keen to speak about it, background information, facts and figures, contacts for other spokespeople, and Migrant Voice's position on the issue. Journalists are busy and the more information you provide the more likely you are to secure coverage.

Setting up the interview(s)

Preparation is crucial

The recipe for success for the Meet A Migrant sessions, such as the meeting with Syrian refugees, was to provide journalists with detailed briefings on an issue, and migrants with support and advice on issues such as how to politely decline to answer questions with which they were uncomfortable and on the expectations and quirks of the British press.

Stay strong

Make sure the stories of the migrants selected for interviews are the strongest examples of the issue being spotlighted. If their case is not strong, you are likely to end up sending up the strategically wrong message to journalists.

The personal can be political

Journalists often want personal details. But many people, not just migrants, find this intrusive and irrelevant. In the meetings on family reunification, for example, refugees and asylum seekers from Syria struggled to answer repeated questions by journalists about their wives and families: these are private topics that are not discussed with strangers. By briefing them about British media culture we helped them understand the importance of articulating their feelings in order to help public and politicians empathise with their plight. Gentle intervention by us encouraged them to say more about their wives than merely, “I need her and she looks after me.”

One size doesn't fit all

A factor in the overall success of the Meet a Migrant project was the flexibility to change the original Meet a Migrant format and experiment to take account of fast-moving events, like a sudden election call, and opportunities, such as the Great Get Together.

Prepare participants for disappointment

A meeting on visa restrictions on spouses and family migration rules was cancelled because few of the invited journalists wanted to attend. This was disappointing for the migrants who had spent time preparing case studies of their own situations. It is vital to always emphasise one of the realities of dealing with the media: that there is no guarantee of media interest and that even when interviews are given, the articles and programmes might never see the light of day. This is part of media training.

We are them

We are not detached from the people we work with. Having a diverse migrant team with experience of many of the issues we are raising made a significant difference and removed the ‘them and us’ barrier. This trust gave migrants’ the confidence to discuss personal matters with us and to overcome nervousness about “going public” on controversial issues in a climate of hostility to migration. We, in turn, had a duty of care when steering their stories into the media.

Dealing with journalists

Exclusives and media competition

Some journalists were uncomfortable during the session on family reunification because they did not want to share the interviews with migrants with other journalists. On some occasions, journalists preferred selecting a migrant from the advance information provided by Migrant Voice and we supported them with the interview. Occasionally it is worth considering offering “exclusive” access to a person or story in the expectation of generous coverage. This will depend on the topic, the journalist, the media outlet and the issue.

Some stories attract new journalists

A topical, newsworthy issue, such as the arrival of Syrian refugees or the Irene Clennell story, attracts journalists and organisations with whom small specialist NGOs are rarely in contact. This helps build your media contacts list. Identify journalists you think may be interested in your area of work, engage them, and maintain relationships including with freelancers.

Keep control of the story

It's important to establish and maintain a strong line of communication with the journalist(s) before, during and after the interviews or meetings. As well as helping you build a strong relationship with the journalist that may be useful in the future, this means you can divert them away from any unhelpful angles and keep control of the story.

Phone numbers

We learned to advise potentially vulnerable migrants not to give their phone numbers to journalists, because a number of members who did so were bothered by a flurry of phone calls and became concerned about the nature of the questions they were getting from journalists: we had lost control of the story.

Keeping the story going

If at first you don't succeed...

Despite the collapse of the meeting on divided families we felt that the experiences of the migrants who had offered to take part were valid and important. So we organised interviews between individual journalists and our selected migrant members, which resulted in opinion pieces in the Morning Star and openDemocracy that quoted five of the case studies and a news interview with one of the migrants in The Independent. Be prepared to be flexible and adapt your format and approach in order to secure coverage.

Stories and policies

Stories have a greater impact and potential to influence policy if they are part of your organisation's wider work. For instance, we fed our report on the Dublin Regulation to political parties before the 2017 general election and the SNP pledged in their manifesto to review Dublin. The sessions on the rights of EU nationals, and resultant media coverage, reinforced Migrant Voice's meeting the following week with the Immigration Minister and junior Brexit minister.

Strength in numbers

Working with other organisations amplified our messages. A coalition enables each organisation to make use of the other organisations' strengths and get access to their media contacts. When we joined with faith leaders in appealing for the government to do more to support refugees, in particular around family reunification, we added impact to their news conference by organising the participation of a Syrian refugee as a key speaker. At the same time, we gained from the media attention generated by their public positions and their combined call for policy change.

There's more to a story than telling it

Little of the radio, TV, online and newspaper coverage generated by Meet a Migrant would have been possible without a huge amount of preparatory work: discussions with migrants, organising and running meetings, media training, preparing reports and statements, endless emailing and phoning, as well as work building trust and reputation among migrant communities over many years.

Supported by



Migrant Voice also acknowledges the financial support of the Foundation Open Society Institute

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- 12: Screenshot, www.buzzfeed.com