Podcast Series 2 – Hope-based human rights

Episode 5 – To hope for the future
Thomas Coombes

Hi, this is To The Righthouse, a new podcast series by the Global Campus of Human Rights. From scepticism to hope, from utopia to empathy, we discuss human rights, riding waves, but also signaling where the light is. This podcast was recorded in Venice, Italy, on the island of Lido at the Global Campus headquarters.

Graham Finlay (GF) - Welcome to the final episode in our Global Campus podcast series on hope-based human rights. Today we're going to talk about embracing hope. As a final reflection, we want to hope for the future and draw a picture of the world we want to see. For this, we have a special guest whose work is all focused on hope-based communication. It is a pleasure for me to welcome Thomas Coombes, who is a global communication strategist and alumnus of the Global Campus. Thank you, Thomas, for joining us today.

Thomas Coombes (TC) - Hi, Graham. Thanks so much for having me.

(GF) - So Thomas, you developed an approach called 'hope-based communication' to help the human rights and other progressive movements develop new narratives for social change, what inspired you to start this initiative?

(TC) - Yes, it's a great question. So it was really… ironically, came from a real place of despair because I was working in communications at Amnesty International and I thought I was doing everything I should be doing because I believed that the way to make things better was to name and shame people who are violating human rights and raise awareness about those things. But it was the rise of populist authoritarian leaders around the world who, like from my point of view, really didn't seem to be good leaders, but they were winning elections, sort of bringing back really hateful rhetoric that we thought belonged to the past; particularly it was seeing European countries fail to live up to the values they proclaimed around human rights and just turn their back on people seeking asylum. It's particularly painful to me, because my own family were refugees in Europe. I kind of keep going thinking every day that the things that happened in the past, we've learned from them, and we're building on it. So basically I really just had to confront my own approach to the work I was doing. I had to ask myself: what is it I'm trying to achieve here? I think all of us working in human rights, we're all motivated by a desire to make people care about other human beings to take action, maybe to change their minds. What I've realised by sort of looking at neuroscience and psychology was that this wasn't happening, and primarily it was because of fear.

(GF) - I think that's a really important insight into how things go. I'm wondering… I think it's probably exacerbated by the role of social media, which of course tends to play on the negative, on quite shocking and disturbing images. How do you navigate that? How do you counsel organisations to engage on social media in this hope-based way?

(TC) - Yes, social media: it's really interesting. I think one of the challenges for the human rights movement is that we haven't actually adapted to the age of social media. We really build on what's called in the science world 'the idea of an information deficit': that people need to know what's happening. And I think before the internet that made sense, it made sense for Amnesty International to tell people: the Argentinian junta is torturing people, bring facts to light. But now we live in a world where there's a complete overload of information. I think this has exposed what's always been there in a way: we're basically operating with an outdated model of how human beings operate and make decisions, which is not just sort of rational, utilitarian decision-making and weighing up of different rights, but [sort of] the importance of belonging and group identity and how people think. So in other words, like confirmation bias: that we used to think if someone was wrong, we would tell them they're wrong, we would show them the facts, and then they would change their mind. But actually, humans just don't work that way. I think what the internet has done, is just sort of supercharged that process, which we can talk about more later.

But just to go back to the point with human rights groups, so much of what I did, and my colleagues did in our daily work - writing press releases, writing reports, issuing petitions - all of those things are based on paper, they're things that we did before the internet - also letter writing, which I think is really important. But we haven't actually adapted the way we operate on a daily basis to this new internet world. I think what's actually the conversation we need to have - and this is what a hope-based communication as a method aims to do - is to remind ourselves what's our goal. I think that goal that we have of a world where maybe human rights are enjoyed by all or where maybe we see the humanity in each other, (it) sometimes feels so vague that we sort of give up on it. Then we just kind of think: 'okay, we'll try and prevent the bad things from happening as much as we can'. There's a certain fatalism in our movement that when bad things happen, there'll be a high price for those things. But we're not being driven by our own momentum of what we're trying to achieve. I think social media is basically making it impossible to ignore that, but that's a conversation for us to have anyway.

(GF) - Yeah, I think that's a very inspiring sort of view. I'm often struck by: what if everybody enjoyed a certain minimal level of human rights, would we just go out of business? Well, no, of course not. I think there is a positive vision of what human rights - as if we were rich or [as] the life of people really enjoying and having some control over their enjoyment of human rights, (that) goes beyond, the sort of minimal standards for all countries that we often think about. I also was really struck by the implications of your thinking for human rights education, as you say: 'when we often look at human rights education, we expect it to work like a magic wand', right? You show people these human rights values and commitments, and then they just live up to them. Whereas as you say, people are much more complicated than that. And, again, we have to get people beyond perhaps a narrow focus on violations to the human. So maybe I want to focus a little more on how you do this. In your approach you recommend moving from 'fear to hope', from 'against to for', from 'problem to solution', from 'threat to opportunity', from 'victims to heroes'. As we want to motivate and encourage our audience, what would a checklist of 'hope-based human rights communication' look like? How do you do this?

(TC) - Yes, thank you. I developed a hope-based communication plan because I realised we, as activists, were part of the populist story. We were really struggling to counter public narratives. Just, for example, the idea like 'refugees are terrorists': we know this is a lie, and we use facts to

rebut it, but that just seems to reinforce it. So what I realised is… actually what we need is: we need our own narrative, we have to put forward our own narrative. Actually, none of us knew what that narrative was, we all had these values, but we hadn't really articulated them. At first, I brought to my colleagues amazing research from people like Anat Shenker-Osorio - whom I'll talk about in a minute - but I realised that it was very hard for people to take on board this new way of speaking. So the idea of hope-based communication and these five shifts you just listed is that it's up to all of us, every single one of us, to actually articulate what we want the narrative to be. So when I say 'hope-based', it's very different to being positive or negative, or optimist or pessimist. Hope is the idea that tomorrow can be better. When I say 'hope-based', I mean that we are basing our narrative on the thing we're hoping to achieve. So for me, I think it's more empathy and compassion between human beings. I see that now as the goal of human rights work, which has implications for education.

Maybe we can come back to this a bit, but so just practically, I basically came up with those shifts originally, which was like: instead of me telling my colleagues 'you should say this or that', they would literally just put those lists on a bookmark next to their computer screen. And when you're writing a report about human rights violations, right now, it would be 90% documenting the problem, and then maybe two pages at the end of some recommendations, maybe we could say: 'oh, actually, maybe I should do some more research to say, for example: 'let me show how resettlement works, let me do some research on Norway or Canada and show that this works'. Because this was really what the problem was with Europe and other rich countries not being ready to welcome others, they were afraid about how it would work. We needed more of Angela Merkel's 'wir schaffen das', 'we can get this done' message. So that's just one example.

So it's not about ignoring the sort of things we're shifting from, but balancing them. So for example, putting the problem in the context of the solution. But the main point for me was: there's just an overwhelming amount of neuroscience and psychology, and sort of input from focus groups, and it's too much for any one person to take in, I still can't process it all. But what really matters is that we're not repeating ideas that are harmful. And we're basing it… and to me, the great activists - who I wanted to dedicate my career to working for - they're the ones with the ideas. So really, the basic point is just about you asking yourself: 'have I actually talked about what I want?' And the really crucial thing, which we can go into the science, is: if you don't talk about the thing you want - whether that's an idea or certain kinds of behaviour - there's no chance it will ever happen. So we really have to put in front of people the things we want to see.

Education, maybe just quickly I'll give that example: so when I apply it to human rights - and this comes out of workshops I've done with activists all over the world - we start to think: what we're trying to achieve, again, is that sense of we have compassion for other people just because they're human, not because say we're from the same country or the same group. And really, then actually, so suddenly, I see human rights as building empathy and compassion, building a sense of humanity, and suddenly, 'oh well, actually, we need to figure out how to train empathy' - it's actually a muscle that you can learn to… extend empathy to people who are different from you. So the science of empathy is that you're most likely able to be trained to have more empathy between the ages of 3 and 6 and 12 and 15. So, suddenly we look at human rights education: we have access to all those children, but we're telling them how UN special mechanisms work, which is, okay, it's important, but we're missing this amazing opportunity to give children an opportunity to practice

having empathy and seeing the world from the perspective of someone different to them, which actually was what Amnesty International was doing since the 1970s by asking someone to sit down and write a letter to another human being and try and understand their experience. And so, one really simple question anyone can ask themselves to apply this method is: what's the picture you want to get in your mind when you think of whatever your cause is? So if it's human rights, what's the picture we want to see? Is it people protesting? Or is it people sitting down to write a letter, for example.

(GF) - I think that's really fascinating. And I'm going to take that insight into children's moral and educational development away, because I actually do quite a bit of work with children and teens in various guises. It certainly harmonizes with my experience in my own children's mental development. So to know that there is sort of particular periods where there's a lot of growth and a lot of development, in children in sort of bursts, is a really exciting kind of prospect. I've often been struck by, as you say, our educational materials, our campaigns, even our sort of youth social movements, social entrepreneurship, don't really take advantage of that particular opportunity. So thanks for that. I think I am almost, I am actually curious, just to ask you: tell me more about the science behind this, because I think that can really expose some of the potential here, which isn't being tapped.

(TC) - Yes, great. I'd love to. Well, actually, it brings me to a couple of things. So one is on a very basic level on child psychology, that was actually one of the first things that made me realise the need to do things differently. It was actually my boss at Amnesty Osama Saeed Bhutta [who] brought in these amazing people from the United States who have an approach called 'hardwired'. And they're really focused on changing sort of those really deep emotional issues like say, abortion or LGBT+ rights. But what they were doing is basically, it's a version of the approach that's really successful now called 'deep canvassing', which is essentially changing someone's mind by listening to them rather than lecturing them.

So they would sit down in the focus groups, and think how could they get someone with a strong Christian identity, to maybe change their mind about abortion or LGBT rights without actually making them sacrifice their identity. And we've seen this, I mean, bring amazing changes in Ireland. But what was key, they actually built a lot of this on this idea of a book from neuroscientists called 'The Whole-Brain child'. And they have one… it's just a metaphor that simplifies how our brain works, but they talk about children, but also adults, having an upstairs brain and a downstairs brain. The downstairs brain is essentially our fear response. So it's what gets triggered when we feel a sense of danger. What they now know through brain scanning is that when we feel empathy, when we're starting to think of the world from the perspective of other people, that's the upstairs, a different part of our brain, the frontal and upper part. So essentially, there's all these findings about how humans work coming from neuroscience and hardwired [is] one of the few people who say: 'well, that has relevance for our activism, right? Because if we're in a fear mode, naturally, we're thinking of self-interest'. So when I was writing press releases, saying: 'We live in a dangerous world. Donald Trump is going to bring us back to the 1930s. There's waves of refugees coming', we're triggering people's fear response and that primes them to think of self-interest, and maybe put a strong leader in charge, whereas actually that empathy needs people to feel comfortable and safe.

But there's another… sort of taking that a step further [it] was how this is my primary interest? Because my family are Holocaust survivors, I'm really interested in how we prevent atrocities. So for example, in Myanmar around the same time we were seeing Buddhist monks spreading all this, you know, really dehumanising stories about the Rohingya Muslims and we see things as similar as Islamophobia around the world and what's frightening is the sophistication with which people can use social media - so this comes back to your original question - to find incredibly sophisticated ways to trigger our fear and hatred of others. And just exposing it's not enough. It's not enough to say Buddhist monks are saying XYZ on Facebook, because that's just repeating again, that stuff and it also reinforces the sort of the division. It creates a narrative that you've got, everyone is either a Muslim or Buddhist or Muslim or Hindu. So what do we do instead?

What we also learned from empathy is that people… the real insight from hardwired again, so for example, LGBT campaigns: if you want to change someone's mind, you need to show them someone like them changing their mind. So they've found a really powerful - would be, say, a parent, a conservative parent, accepting their child for being, say, transgender, and then becoming quite open minded. And they make advertisements doing that - that's really powerful.

So what I would like to see is: when we're faced with dehumanising content on the internet, can we create re-humanising content? So can we tell a story say of like, it's been done in Northern Ireland, a Catholic and a Protestant, or, you know, a Muslim and a Buddhist or Muslim and a Hindu, whatever the context is, basically telling stories of humanity, of people coming together, it's what's called in science 'positive social contact'. So we know, for example, around Europe, that communities actually have a lot of newcomers, are actually quite welcoming. But you can't just take in someone who's claiming asylum and bring him door to door, but we can use the internet to show someone a story of a community that they can relate to, seeing that. So this is an example of how we can basically try and make empathy viral. So a lot of people say: 'how is hope gonna compete with fear?' It's going to be hard but the point is: we have to use the same tools to test and refine how we talk about these values and these stories, so that they compete with those ones that are fearful and divisive.

(GF) - I think that's very, very inspiring and tough, I imagine, and difficult, because I'm thinking also … to policy implications. So for example, if people are interested in the situation surrounding climate refugees, they're very often leveled as a threat to states and to wealthier populations, or neighboring populations or so forth. If you don't do something about the climate, millions of climate refugees are going to swarm into your country, which, of course, is the exact opposite kind of metaphor you want to be using about anybody on the move. So that messaging, I imagine, is very challenging, but it has real policy implications. I guess this is also a helpful time to move towards some of the conceptual basis of this, because, as you already said, the positive message is more challenging to craft, and to put forward and to push people's buttons. And so I can see how you don't want these positive stories, you know, refugees who become doctors or whatever. Which also has the problem: what if refugees, for all sorts of reasons, don't become doctors but just are trying to deal with the trauma they've experienced? How do you craft those messages so that they don't get sucked into the sort of debate? Right? Or scoring points in social media? I realise you've already answered this to a certain extent. But it seems like that there are a lot of pitfalls there. I'm wondering if you ever encounter a sort of resistance from the groups you're working with, when you try and urge them to have this hope-based communication?

(TC) - Yes, you know, it's a really great and important point. So there's… it just I think speaks to the point of, like, what narrative communication strategy looks like in practice and a way of thinking about it, that I find really helpful, [is that] there's a group called [Narrative Initiative](#) and they say: 'narratives are like a mosaic'. So a mosaic is built up of loads of different tiles. And stories are like the tiles of a mosaic. So there's no one story that we'll tell that will change things. It's about telling a whole stream of different stories, constantly, that reinforce a certain way of thinking. And so the idea is: the stories should be driven by the way of thinking that we want to get across, by our values. And also, increasingly, people should be telling their own story. So it should be less of a case of a migrants rights organisation telling the story of a so-called 'good immigrant', because that person should be telling their own story.

One thing that's really important, though, is that's why I always say 'hope-based' rather than 'positive'. So 'positive' suggests things are good, 'hope-based' is about how things could be or should be. And it goes to that point around climate refugees: we have this deep fear and worry about the things that could potentially go wrong in the world, so we say: 'oh, you know, if you think it's bad now, you'll [see] later'. The trick is to actually be strategic about the emotions we're putting out there politically. We can all personally… everyone has the right to feel their fear and sadness. But the point is to think about what is the emotion we need people to feel in order for them to support human rights-friendly policies. So part of the story can be that, but we have to balance it with actually what needs to happen and show people that there's a future that we can get to, but also the behaviour we want to see.

Actually, for me, we have a shift called 'from victim to human'. So the first point is that, the basic right: we don't want to trigger pity, we want to trigger solidarity. But actually, it's not even about showing a specific individual, it's actually more… I encourage people to think more of telling stories of encounters. Because anyway, none of us exist really as single individuals. Hannah Arendt, for example, defines freedom as the ability to bring things into the world with other people. So in a way, we're bringing already a kind of conservative mindset when we're just thinking of individuals. So the point is… actually, to me with migration it's not actually about the people who move, it's about the people who welcome - that's the problem: it's whether societies are open enough or caring enough. And I think we saw that societies that weren't open also weren't very well prepared to deal with COVID, because they didn't have good health care systems, for example.

So it's a really important idea that there's a common set of universal values that can be used to sort of 'against human rights' or 'for human rights'. And it's not just human rights, they're also connected to climate change, all the different causes. Or different issues are connected by those underlying values. So what we need to do is like, articulate what is [are] the idea[s] we're trying to promote, and then look at how we bring those to life with stories. And so again, obviously we need to avoid stories that essentialize. But it's also really important to say that if we just show a story… sometimes it feels simple to show a story of someone doing something bad and someone else suffering, but that's still a victim story, even if we don't use the word victim. So it's more complicated - because life is more complicated - to have a hope-based story where people are empowered. But I think if we focus on that sense of people coming together… So for example, the story around people on the move that activists often come up with is a dinner table with hosts and

newcomers coming together. What's really important is that it's not just the person starting a new life in a new place who's changed, the person hosting and welcoming is also changed by the experience, because actually, they're also the target audience. They're the people who other people like them need to see and change that. We could talk about maybe what that idea around human rights might be. But let me just pause first.

(GF) - Yes, well, actually, I do really want to talk about your actual conception of human rights. But just one more sort of joined up thing. I mean, I think your connection of sort of human rights responses or responses to people on the move, and all sorts of other things, is really connected to the COVID experience. I mean, I think we saw that societies with very low levels of trust, also didn't do very well, in responding to the pandemic, and still aren't in many ways, but I really thought, I mean, it's clear that you connect your human rights work with other issues, like the environment where this very same change is being done in terms of people in the environmental movement, have really consciously I think, tried to move away from: 'we're all going to die', as the message, to more positive visions of change. You know: 'look, we can do this, we can live differently, but better', in many, many ways, because the scaring people had been, to some extent, either too successful or did actually lead to a lot of people becoming defensive. And so do you keep those connections going? Or does it depend on the issue or the group you're working with?

(TC) - Yes, for me, the most interesting piece around the work on narrative is the idea that below, beneath narratives are things called meta narratives of worldviews. The idea that there's a certain way of thinking. On a very basic level, it has an idea of 'a strict parent' - might be more conservative in favour, like punishment, whereas 'a nurturing parent' is more likely to favour say, progressive policies, and see the importance of working together to fix things. So George Lakoff who's like the original sort of expert on narratives and framing, says that progressives should be careful not to activate a kind of what moral worldview or a way of thinking they don't actually believe in but they think other people believe in. So we might say: 'oh, we need migrants, because it's good for the economy' or 'climate change is going to harm the economy if we don't tackle it', but is actually build on your own worldview, which he says is built on hope, or responsibility and empathy.

And what I'm going to want to add to it is 'shared humanity'. So the idea that we're all human so that we see the humanity in other people, but that would have three aspects. One is that human nature is actually to work together and cooperate not to be individuals. And there's a false idea from nature that, you know, we're naturally like survival of the fittest. The idea that kindness and caring can be a political thing, you know, because right now, it seems naive to say that and also that humans are the people who make change happen that is by acting in solidarity, not this idea of governments or companies, but also just individuals who stand in solidarity with other humans can make change happen. That's a certain way of thinking that all of us need to reinforce all the time. And so that's what we need to think about in any work we do, or any communication we make. What's the moral case I'm making for what I want? And am I actually using the morality I care about and the values I care about? Or am I using ones that I think will get me a quick win, but may not actually build the society I want to live in?

(GF) - I mean, I think that's, again, the instrumentalisation of morality is always somewhat problematic, right? Find a win or persuade, rather than sort of base it on a moral basis. I've been

delighted to see how many references you've made to philosophers, since that's my background. I sort of want to ask you a philosophical question, which, you know, arises from actually some of the materials in your hope-based communication strategy and some of the issues you've been talking about. So I noticed that your approach notes that - and this is a quotation - 'most values such as justice, freedom, equality are contested concepts, they mean different things to different people'. So you talked about cross-religious conflicts and things like that, you talked about trying to build upon our shared universal human group characteristics like empathy, and so forth. But how much contestation or variation do you see around human rights in terms of what they mean to different people? You know, at what point? How much, you know, engagement across divides? Or how much can you concede to people's very, very different perspectives, very different histories of human rights, very different orientations towards human rights, whether they've experienced decolonization or not, how much give is there and how much contestation is possible before it stops being about human rights or stops being a productive conversation about human rights?

(TC) - Yeah, it's a very good question. I'm not sure if I'm capable of articulating it but, I feel, it goes back to Albert Einstein's theory of relativity that, to me, it's universal, and it's there but no one's actually capable, no one person can articulate it on their own, because we all have our subjective points of view. So, Anat Shenker-Osorio, I mentioned before, she really challenged me to go on this journey, because she did a cognitive linguistic analysis of how we talk about human rights. She pointed out, there's a contradiction, because sometimes we say: 'human rights are inherent, we're born with them, you can't take away our rights, we all have rights', then we say: 'governments are taking away our rights or giving us our rights'. So human rights become this object that's given to us or taken away from us, rather than something that guides us in making difficult decisions in our lives. So she wrote a paper called 'A brilliant way of living our lives'. So that actually human rights rather than being this menu of entitlements, which really isn't a helpful thing in sort of messaging, because we can see refugee rights, for example, very quickly get taken away. So actually, this idea that human rights is something to guide us in our behaviour. And to me, that connects much more to the universality of human rights.

I'm really in favour of legal frameworks, I don't want to give the impression otherwise. But I think the point is, any attempt to articulate that, in law or in words, is always going to be subject to the perspective of who and the power and privilege of whoever's doing it. But I think what is encouraging from the neuroscience, and learning about how the human brain works is, we all have the same hardware, our software can vary, culture teaches us, trains our brains to operate in different ways, but I do think there are certain basic ideas that we're all capable of having more empathy towards other people and understanding the perspective of others, working together and so on.

So I think that's what's really important for human rights. And what I am trying to do is actually move people away from words and into stories and pictures and images. And often actually, once we start doing that, we find that universality, and that's also what's really important because the only way we can compete with populists to use really emotional fear based messaging, is to tap into other set of emotions like awe, admiration, generosity, humour, and even love. And it's again something we're quite afraid to do, but what human emotion is more powerful than love? Or universal?

(GF) - The word known to all men - in the words of Ulysses by James Joyce - and women, of course, but so, I guess, just to sum up we've talked a lot about your hope-based communication and how you try and use it in different kinds of contexts. What is your vision of the positive life lived by people who do enjoy their human rights? And do you think that vision is universal? Or is it moderated through your own history, which has brought you to this point?

(TC) - That's a good and difficult question. You know, what, one thing that's again, really interesting, coming from research into how the anti-choice movement works in the United States, was that community forms values. So actually, that sense of belonging is what drives confirmation bias and group behaviour. So to me again, it's actually the law, I feel like bad things will always happen, but it's more about how we respond to them. So to me a world of human rights is when we have more human solidarity. It's actually Michel Foucault who said this just in a press conference once that 'human rights is about the right of individuals and a duty to act in solidarity with other people just because we're human.' I think that's what it's all about.

(GF) - That's great. And, as you say, there's a lot of contestation around what are sometimes called 'solidarity rights': the right to a clean environment, the right to peace and things like that. And also, I think a whole new attention to how social movements can be an essential part of what we're claiming as a human right, and it sounds like you're best placed to help them realise that goal. So thank you so much, Thomas. I've learned a lot and now I feel more hopeful at the end of this.

(TC) - That's the goal. Thanks Graham, it was lovely to talk to you.

(GF) - This was the last episode in our podcast series on hope-based human rights. We are very grateful to all our guests and to everyone interested in hopeful visions of the future of human rights. Since everyone could promote human rights, we hope that these conversations will help and sustain you and your own everyday work for human rights. Thank you for listening.