
Migration in the media: Telling authentic stories with impact

“HEARD

This guide is for media professionals who want to tell authentic, interesting and powerful stories about young people who've migrated to the UK.

Migration is often represented in a one dimensional way, inadvertently othering the people at the centre of the story. This representation shapes public opinion of migration, and people who migrate, in a negative way. It can lead to policies that work against us as a society, rather than for us all.

Great media content has the power to change this, drawing audiences in and shifting understanding, by representing migration in a relatable, fresh and nuanced way. It ensures people feel heard and seen.

“When I see myself represented on screen I feel the joy of being seen and that people know I am here and matter. We need stories that do this more and we need them to drown out the negativity”

Precious, Media Mover

We know media professionals want to tell stories about migration. We also know that teams are stretched - time is short, budgets are restricted and the Covid pandemic has had a lasting impact on the industry. On top of this, migration can feel like a weighty and confusing subject. Media professionals might worry about saying the wrong thing and may also have their own preconceptions about the issue.

This guide aims to help tell broad, engaging stories

This guide was co-produced by and includes quotes from Media Movers* – young people with different experiences of migration. It offers practical recommendations on how media portrayals and stories can:

- Incorporate sensitive terminology and imagery
- Better represent people's experiences
- Avoid sounding morally superior or overly negative

*[Media Movers](#) is run by [Heard](#), an organisation working with the media to tell stories that change hearts and minds. The young people within the Media Movers network meet with media professionals, supporting the development of nuanced stories about migration that are not often heard.

“Having an audience to talk to and them listening would allow me to talk about anything without fear. It would show that people want to hear a story from me and what I have gone through.”

Hansnii, Media Mover

Stories you could tell. Media Movers say...

“We are not just a sad story”

Show people with migrant backgrounds as more than their experiences. Showcase supportive relationships as the rule rather than the exception (e.g. in friendships, romantic relationships, or a person's local community). By repeatedly telling only emotionally intense stories, it can negatively impact young people's mental health and turn audiences away. When we show personalities, interests, quirks, hopes and fears, we value the story and the person beyond the stereotypes we might associate with them.

“Show the bigger picture - always contextualise”

Personal stories are a great way of drawing people in, but research shows that we subconsciously explain away an individual's experience to make the world feel more manageable. Focusing only on an individual story can paint a picture of isolated, random experiences. Therefore, we need to help the audience understand the root causes of the issue, and the possible solutions that come with that, by showing the bigger picture and the systems in which these experiences happen. This might simply be a conversation with two characters or a brief moment in the plot.

“We want to see migrant stories within other stories... this will also make it easier to reach people, when migration is within a bigger story”

By embedding migration into everyday experiences we can show how migration exists in normal life, drawing audiences in and helping them to see how we all connect. We know that issue-led narratives can be hard to get commissioned. That's why Media Movers are looking for new narratives that intersect with all parts of life (e.g. education, mental health, work) and that allows us to tell a unique story.

“We are normal people... we don't all get top grades, jobs or always excel”

Stories of people with migrant backgrounds that only focus on them being highly successful in a certain area suggests they are only worthy if they meet an invisible criteria of success. This can negatively impact people who have migrated, as well as wider audiences. We need stories everyone can see themselves in. We understand there is pressure to tell the newest or most exciting story, but this can lead to only showing extremes. Audiences, however, are looking for more than that. Let's celebrate the average individual doing interesting things, living a life we can relate to, and connect with.

“Make the most of the different experiences we have had - show the diversity of people who move”

There are many experiences of migration that often don't get seen. This means that people rely on portraying and understanding migration through tropes and stereotypes. We can avoid this by showing different people, exploring and highlighting the various ways people move and showing their experiences within the system. The diversity of human identity - race, religion, sexuality, etc. moves us further away from tropes around migration. Coupled with hiring and including advisers with experience in the creative process, we are then able to bring to life new stories around migration.

Stories and portrayals

Media Movers value

Talking about migration sensitively and accurately

Migration is complex and there are many different legal terms that describe people's experiences. The Media Movers agreed that no one term fits all, but they were clear that it's important to identify people and their experiences accurately.

Say phrases like **'person who now lives in the UK', 'person who moved', 'young man with refugee status'**.

When we only use words like 'migrant', 'refugee' and 'asylum seeker' to describe people, we identify them only by their experiences and ignore the other aspects of their lives that make them who they are. Adding words like 'illegal' (e.g. 'illegal migrant') adds a criminal element to this, distorting the reality of migration and misrepresenting people who migrate. Words like these result in people subconsciously distancing themselves from this group. [Stand Up For Human Rights](#) have further suggestions about this in their toolbox.

People with different migrant backgrounds will always have a way of describing themselves. So, if it's not obvious, and you have the opportunity, don't be afraid to ask! And, if you want to look at the legal terms people use, check out the [Right to Remain Toolkit](#).



The moments in [Home](#) that reminded us of our human connections



Mateo's storyline in [Superstore](#) filled with kindness and compassion from his colleagues



The way [Limbo](#) asserts the reality of the experience without speaking to stereotypes and making us laugh



Daniel and Viktor's heart-breaking love story in [Years and Years](#)



The portrayal of Sumaya's family in [Rocks](#) that reminded us of our own loving and chaotic families

The stories we tell vs. the images we use

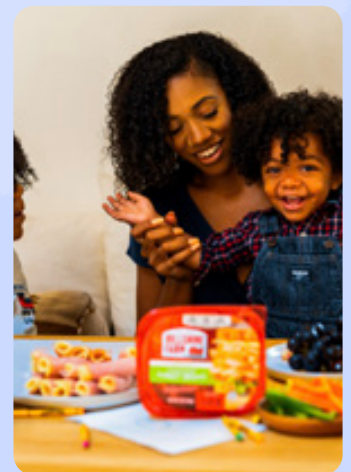
The words we use are only one part of the stories we tell. People who have migrated are keen for the images and imagery on our screen to reflect their realities. All too often, we see extreme stock images or depictions of just one part of their experiences. Images of boats, crowds or violence at borders can further stigmatise, dehumanise and reinforce the idea that experiences of migration are just doom and gloom.

Young people want to see the breadth of their stories on screen, rather than a generic or stereotypical idea of migration.

Rather than just the images of the worst moments, we can tell stories about migration while using pictures like these, which highlight the positivity in their lives too.

“I see myself on the screen as a free, happy, funny and enjoyable person”

Isabel, Media Mover



Source: Unsplash

Looking for more in-depth help on how to talk about migration for your media organisation? We run free media briefings, training sessions and workshops that the Managing Director of Vogue described as “Unlike any meeting, I’ve ever experienced in my 20 years as a journalist”.

These relationships and collaborations create a dialogue that brings about better, more accurate and authentic representation - that answers people’s questions about people who migrate and their lives, helps to build understanding and tells brilliant stories.

If you are interested in working on impactful and authentic stories, Heard can help.

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