

Institution: The University of Leeds		
Unit of Assessment: 19 Politics and International Studies		
Title of case study: Changing the Department for International Development's messaging on national interest and foreign aid		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2011-2016		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Graeme Davies	Professor of International Security	2009-2019
Simon Lightfoot	Professor of Politics	2005-
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Research on public perceptions of aid, co-produced with the Strategic Insights Team at the Department for International Development (DFID), changed DFID's communication strategy and how it – and now its successor, the Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office (FCDO) – conducts messaging research. In particular, the research provided new analytical tools that allowed DFID to identify how specific development aid messages resonated with particular segments of the public. This led to alterations in how DFID carries out research as well as changes to DFID's communication strategy so as to maximize aid support by framing public communications in ways that better connect with public expectations. As a result, this research contributed to the evidence-base for the UK government's efforts both to maintain public support for aid spending and pursue national interests associated with being the second largest bi-lateral aid donor in the world.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>The commitment to aid as a crucial part of its foreign policy has made the UK a global leader in international development, placing it at the forefront of responses to global challenges such as climate change, poverty alleviation, and health, while also increasing the UK's global influence and reach. However, both the commitment and the cost of aid are controversial, therefore it is important to understand what specific segments of the UK public think about aid spending and priorities, and how messages help influence more positive attitudes towards it.</p> <p>This impact case study is underpinned by two interconnected research streams examining public attitudes to aid. Research by Prof. Simon Lightfoot (2011-12) highlighted the challenge faced by government in maintaining support for aid commitments in the face of scepticism and hostility in public opinion and the mainstream media [1]. This qualitative research identified that the government needed to better communicate the relevance and importance of aid commitments to the public. It argued that, contrary to DFID's assumptions, a focus on results-driven communications could be counter-productive, ultimately weakening development commitments to poverty reduction. These findings overlapped with those of a 2009-12 ESRC-funded study by Profs. Graeme Davies (Leeds) and Robert Johns (Essex) on British public attitudes to foreign policy [a]. This research included unique survey questions that asked respondents whether British foreign aid should be allocated on the basis of recipient need or UK national interest. Significant results suggested a greater resonance with national interest narratives [2-4]. These projects came together via a co-authored blog post in 2015 [5] and a joint conference paper given at the University of Essex in 2016 [6], where the national interest/need question attracted the attention of the then DFID Head of Strategic Insights.</p> <p>Contemporaneously, the November 2015 government white paper 'UK aid: tackling global challenges in the national interest' set out a new strategy for UK aid with an explicit focus on the 'national interest'. DFID had to ensure they communicated the national interest aspect of this new strategy. As a result, DFID commissioned a bespoke co-produced research project with Lightfoot, Davies and Johns (funded by Leeds and Essex Impact Acceleration Accounts</p>		

[b]) to test its current narratives about aid, and to identify and refine a more effective communications strategy around national interest.

To investigate the problem of communicating value-for-money versus national interest framing, the research team drew upon earlier experimental methodologies developed by Davies and Johns, which demonstrated that communication strategies are well-placed to influence public opinion (and informed the DFID research design) [a]. These experiments provided a well-validated method to test the effect of those messages [2-4]. The research tested Lightfoot's theoretical assumptions about the role of messaging [1], showing how the presentation of information by the government has a significant effect on public attitudes towards international affairs [2-4]. This research formed the foundation of the subsequent co-designed research collaboration with the Insight Team and the Communications Insight and Evaluation Advisor at DFID in 2016-17 [b]. Via a series of consultations with DFID, Lightfoot contributed to the research question design whilst Davies designed the final survey and led refinement efforts related to national interest narratives and the messages DFID wanted to test. The team conducted analysis and presented the findings to DFID, with Lightfoot and Davies leading continued engagement efforts, resulting in the impact detailed below. Recommendations derived from the research included that DFID should avoid messages discussing its budget, value for money, expenditure justifications, complex aid rationales, or the need to relate all aid back to internal UK outcomes. Instead, communications should focus on tangible aid outcomes, positive stories, and health aid; and that it should be targeted to apprehensive audiences/media outlets with national messaging related to aid and security, which was seen to generate higher public approval with aid-sceptics and those only 'marginally engaged'.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- [1] Heppell, T. and S. Lightfoot. 2012 'We will not balance the books on the backs of the poorest people in the world': understanding Conservative Party strategy on international aid'. *The Political Quarterly*, 83 (1): 130-38: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-923X.2012.02279.x>
- [2] Johns, R. and G. A. M. Davies. 2012. 'Democratic peace or clash of civilizations? Target states and support for war in Britain and the United States'. *The Journal of Politics*, 74 (4): 1038-1052: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381612000643>.
- [3] Johns, R. and G. A. M. Davies. 2014. 'Coalitions of the willing? International backing and British public support for military action'. *Journal of Peace Research* 51 (6): 767-781: <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0022343314544779>.
- [4] Davies, G. A. M. and R. Johns. 2016. "The domestic consequences of international over-cooperation: an experimental study of micro-foundations", *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 33 (4): 343-360: <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0738894215577556>.
- [5] Davies, G., S. Lightfoot and R. Johns. 23 June 2015. 'UK foreign aid: what do the British public think aid should be for?'. LSE blog, originally published on Political Studies Association Insight blog: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/uk-foreign-aid-what-do-the-british-public-think-aid-should-be-for/>.
- [6] Johns, R., G. A. M. Davies and S. Lightfoot. 30 April 2016. "Needs and interests: understanding the British public's balancing of aid priorities". Paper presented at [Public Opinion and Foreign Aid](#) conference, University of Essex: <https://niehaus.princeton.edu/sites/nccg/files/lightfootdaviesjohnsneedsandinterests.pdf>.

Research supported by the following grants secured in open competition:

- [a] ESRC. R. Johns (Essex) (PI) and G. Davies (Co-I) 'Foreign policy attitudes and support for war among the British public' (RES-062-23-1952; August 2009-April 2012: GBP243,000).
- [b] HEIF/ESRC Leeds/Essex Impact Acceleration Accounts. 'Improving DFID's understanding of the public opinion environment for international aid'. (2016-18: GBP30,260).

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The main beneficiary of the underpinning research has been DFID, which: i) changed how DFID conducted messaging research, and; ii) influenced its communication strategy, helping it to better make the case for aid spending to the UK public. The co-produced research provided evidence that was used to justify internal resource allocation at DFID and beyond, with the research recommendations incorporated into toolkits on how to communicate about aid and national interest, which, the then Director of Communications at DFID explains, are *'now used as part of [DFID's] guidance to those who work on aid communications across government'* [A].

i) Changing research practices and building capacity at DFID

Close and sustained co-operation between the academics and the team at DFID was crucial for providing the Department with the necessary capacity for designing, implementing and analysing public opinion research, and has offered a new model for how it conducts research and creates evidence-bases for policymakers. As part of the research design phase, the research team introduced DFID to new experimental designs [a,6] that could allow pinpointed testing of various demographic groups so as to test specific messages in relation to those particular audiences. This allowed for greater nuance in determining how various groups respond to aid messaging, which had not been available previously to DFID's Insight Team. In response, DFID invited Davies and collaborators to co-produce a customized survey with DFID's Insight Team. Between 17 February 2016 and 16 March 2017, Davies led two survey design meetings, one additional remote meeting, and over 50 email exchanges with DFID so as to develop experiments that reflected their exact communication interests. DFID worked closely with the academics at every stage – designing the project, drafting the questionnaires, analysing the data, and reporting the results. DFID invited Davies and Johns to lead additional refinement efforts to test out various narratives for DFID, specifically those related to economic interests, international leadership, health security and related messages.

By the end of this period the research team jointly produced a series of messages that were then used in a pilot study which was fielded by Prolific (a company which recruits survey participants) amongst a section of the British public [B]. A report on these initial findings led to further refinement of the messages that were then tested in a nationally representative sample in January 2017 by the public opinion firm BMG [C]. According to the Director of Communications at DFID, this research was *'invaluable in helping address a specific need for our communications strategy, namely to better understand how we create messaging that demonstrates the benefits of spending aid to the UK'*. Since DFID itself did *'not have the budget to gather insight'*, and therefore lacked institutional capacity, the Director adds, *'without the support of these academics we would not have been able to undertake this testing to inform our message development'* [A]. Furthermore, DFID's Communications Team's approach to carrying out research and using research data was impacted, with the Director stating, *'as a result of this project we were able to make a case to secure funding from another government department to gather further insight on the topic'* and that the methods they would take from the research team would enable this future research to help them further understand *'how we can best land these messages with the UK public'* [A]. The insights generated, along with the subsequent research mentioned above, has also been used to train and upskill government communications colleagues for use in social media, ministerial statements, and press lines [A,H].

ii) Changing messaging on national interest at DFID

The research subsequently influenced DFID's framing of aid in terms of national interests and led to changes in their messaging, enabling challenging audiences to be reached. The findings were communicated at meetings at DFID (October 2017) and via a presentation to DFID's communication team on the 15 December 2017 [E]. This meeting included the Head of Strategy and Insight, the Insight, Evaluation and Branding Advisor, and the Senior Communications Manager. In response to recommendations from the team, DFID changed their messaging strategy as detailed below.

The research highlighted the importance of a focus on health security, since this has the greatest overall public approval results. A former Communications Insight and Evaluation Advisor at DFID explains that this insight *'was shared with the [Communications] division to help understand how communicating about health security could contribute to ministerial*

priorities to discuss the national interest, reinforcing existing insight, and adding further understanding to how the department can use health security messaging to talk about UK aid in the national interest' [F]. This was put into practice during the 2019 [#100WaysAidWorks](#) social media campaign, where specific examples of health security narratives were used by the Secretary of State for International Development to highlight benefits to the UK [A,G]. Key indicators of the successes of the #100WaysAidWorks campaign were an average of 21,617 impressions per tweet (range of 4,201-45,691) with an average 1.033 engagement rate (range of 0.39-2.46). There was also engagement internationally across country offices – 432 retweets from country offices or international stakeholders and the messages prompting stakeholder participation including: Centre for Disease Control Group, Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, Unilever, British Council, GAVI Alliance, London Zoo, Gates Foundation, VSO, UNICEF and more. According to DFID, this number and range of engagement was *'higher than the average engagement with DFID Twitter content'* [G].

The research recommendations outlined that targeting certain audiences, namely the 'marginally engaged' on aid, with national security messages is very productive in generating their approval. This group is generally sceptical about aid yet can be won round by messages that focus on threats to the UK. This was *'a new insight'* for DFID and added to guidance for communicating with this core audience [F]. Additionally, there is a need for positive narratives about specific projects with tangible outputs, without foregrounding budgeting and expenditure. The former Communications Insight and Evaluation Advisor explains that this *'reinforced current insight (...) indicating that focussing on storytelling on an individual level works more effectively than [a focus on] money spent'* [F]. The study also found that some messages previously used by the DFID team were too indirect to be understood by the public. For example, the causal linkage between aid in Ethiopia and jobs in the UK was too complex to communicate effectively. These research recommendations informed the production of national media-targeted campaigns picked up by national newspapers in 2019, where DFID's 'major headlines' - those issues and messages highlighted as having greatest resonance with the public - were repeated. This led to increases in social media traffic supportive of the UK government maintaining and justifying its aid commitments. DFID has provided examples from this campaign [H], including stories about spending its overseas aid budget on the fight against child sex tourism, which was reported in the *Times* (April 2019), and how British law enforcement is accessing the overseas aid budget for countering extremism in Africa, linked to the terrorism threat in the UK, which was reported in the *Sun* (March 2019). The *Sun* article maintained a focus on national security, the primary concern of the marginally engaged, and on a specific project, whilst only making general claims about the benefits to the UK. Meanwhile, the announcement of the 'What Works – Impact at Scale' initiative funded by DFID, which aims to scale up effective interventions, test innovations, and influence a more effective global response to preventing violence against women and girls, resulted in an article in the *Guardian* (November 2019) with a strong national interest headline, where expenditure is mentioned only in the subheading (reflecting study recommendations), and a positive in-depth article about multiple UK aid successes [H].

The research recommendations have been incorporated into *'a specific "communicating in the national interest" pack. This has been presented to the communications division and discussed with other departmental colleagues, with the core message for the division being to focus on making national interest messaging credible'* [F]. This guidance directly informed the work of approximately 50 staff working in DFID communications as well as communications teams in other departments drawing on the overseas aid budget, together with relevant teams, such as DFID colleagues working on jobs and prosperity programmes in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Trade. Thus, the impact of this research can be understood to have affected the day-to-day work of the Department in drafting ministerial statements, media lines, and providing advice to special advisers, Cabinet Office, and relevant ministers [D]. The new Secretary of State for International Development was briefed using the revised guidance when starting at the department in 2019, improving their understanding of how both they, and the Department, can effectively communicate in the national interest (see '#100WaysAidWorks' above) [A].

Following the merger of DFID with the Foreign & Commonwealth Office in 2020, a Communication Manager at the new Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) explains that *'the insights gained via this research now inform the wider comms strategy of the FCDO and are as relevant as they were before, potentially more so given emphasis in the prime minister's announcement of the merger of showing how aid is spent in the interests of the UK'* [I]. The Prime Minister remarked: *'we must mobilise every one of our national assets, including our aid budget and expertise, to safeguard British interests and values overseas'* [J]. To that end the research insights are now being shared and used in the new FCDO, including in training those working on aid spending [A].

Overall, the impact reach of the project can be seen in the fact that all staff writing government lines and ministerial statements are briefed on the national interest via the Communication Division's guidance, which has shaped aid messaging to the benefit of the UK government [A].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[A] Former Director of Communications, DFID, in relation to 4(i) and (ii). Letter of corroboration dated 19 December 2019.

[B] *Prolific Academic* pilot survey for DFID and preliminary results. Available on request.

[C] BMG survey illustrating refined research design based on DFID input. Available on request.

[D] Former Head of Strategy and Insight, DFID, in relation to 4(ii). Email dated 9 Feb 2018.

[E] Executive summary of recommendations to DFID and presentation delivered at DFID in October 2017.

[F] Former Communications Insights and Evaluations Adviser, DFID, in relation to 4(ii). Emails dated 30 May 2019, 19 December 2019.

[G] Documents relating to social media campaign, in relation to 4(ii). Annotated examples of tweets (September-October 2019) by Secretary of State for International Development as part of #100WaysAidWorks campaign. Indicative example: https://twitter.com/AlokSharma_RDG/status/1168079892392660992?s=20; Former Head of Branding and Campaigns, DFID. Email dated 10 January 2020.

[H] DFID internal document outlining two examples of media communications drawing on lessons from the research from February and November 2019. The resultant newspaper coverage: 'Britain to spend millions in fight against child sex tourism', *The Times*, 3 April 2019: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/millions-in-overseas-aid-to-go-on-fighting-child-sex-tourism-8202l2xrw>; 'TERROR AID British cops will be sent to trouble hotspots in Africa to stop terrorism threat', *The Sun*, 3 March 2019: <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/8548027/british-police-sent-africa-terrorism-threat-foreign-aid-penny-mordaunt/>; 'British government takes global lead on violence against women and girls', *The Guardian*, 2 November 2019: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/nov/02/british-government-takes-global-lead-on-violence-against-women-and-girls>.

[I] Communications Manager, FCDO, in relation to 4(ii). Email dated 9 October 2020.

[J] UK Government press release announcing merger between DFID and F&CO, 16 June 2020: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-announces-merger-of-department-for-international-development-and-foreign-office>.