

Institution: University of Essex		
Unit of Assessment: 19		
Title of case study: Foreign aid in the national interest? Shaping the Department for International Development's communications strategy		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2010-2019		
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:
Robert Johns	Professor of Politics	September 2010 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2016-2019		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Overseas aid can change the lives of the world's poorest, but governments around the world struggle to win support for aid from their sceptical publics. One reason the British government has refocused aid policy from overseas needs to national interests is to win over its domestic audience. But can the public be persuaded that aid serves national interests? Essex-led research addressing that question, co-produced with the Department for International Development (DFID), contributed to reshaping the department's communication strategy. Based on underpinning research on political opinion, a series of survey experiments tested existing and potential new DFID communications to identify whether and when citizens can be convinced that giving aid pays off at home. Key findings were that arguments about health and border security were persuasive and boosted support for aid, while neither general claims about national interests nor specific claims about economic benefits were found to be credible. These and other findings were used to update DFID's communications guidelines and are evidenced in examples of Ministerial and Departmental social and print media messaging. It is rare for academic insights to be injected so directly into government communications – and thus given such reach.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Professor Johns was Principal Investigator alongside co-investigator Professor Graeme Davies on an ESRC-funded study of public opinion on foreign policy [G1]. The research findings offered two relevant features: i) an experimental method for testing different 'national interest' messages – that giving aid delivers benefits at home as well as abroad – on the public; and ii) the first survey evidence of British public reactions to that key message.</p> <p><i>i) Testing the effects of different 'national interest' messages</i></p> <p>Professor Johns' research was at the forefront of bringing the vignette-based survey experimental methods into the mainstream of British public opinion research – and bringing the results into foreign policy circles. In this approach, the detail, context and framing of a policy are manipulated with a view to measuring their effect on public approval. Several publications by Johns and Davies [R1-R4] report results from such experiments. [R2] showed the potential of Prime Ministerial rhetoric to persuade the public to support unpopular policies of appeasing adversaries. The experiments in [R1] and [R4] examined how the public balanced humanitarian and utilitarian motivations when considering the risks of military action. Most telling for DFID, [R3] revealed a public more responsive to national self-interest than to ethical considerations when deciding whether to support multilateral action.</p> <p>As a whole, this research demonstrated the strong potential of survey experiments: first, to examine what shapes support for different foreign policies; second, to gauge the effectiveness of different frames or phrases for conveying DFID's chosen 'national interest' message.</p>		

ii) Public priorities: needs vs. interests

The ESRC-funded research [G1] also addressed DFID's main concern directly, one question asking: "Some people say that Britain's foreign aid should simply be distributed to the countries which are most in need of help. Others say that we should put our own national interests first when deciding how to distribute foreign aid in the developing world. Which best represents your view?" As that government agenda gathered momentum, the research team – now joined by aid expert, Dr Simon Lightfoot – was able to repeat the question in 2015 and published a [blog post based on the new results](#). In both surveys, the question revealed mixed opinions but a clear skew towards national interests. For an Essex workshop in 2016, the team wrote a working paper that analysed responses to the need-interests question in more depth [R5]. It highlighted that those prioritising 'interests' were more sceptical about aid in general, questioning whether a national-interests approach really would boost public support.

The marriage of substance and method was taken up again in co-produced research with DFID. It was funded by an application by Professor Johns and co-authors to the Universities of Essex and Leeds for matching ESRC Impact Acceleration Account funding. DFID provided a statement of support [S2]. A total of £20,000 [G2] was obtained for a two-stage data collection:

- *Pilot*: testing 'national interests' messages to identify promising versions for the main experiment. (Fielded via Prolific Academic, September 2017, N=1,995.)
- *Main survey*: messaging experiments embedded among standard survey measures of attitudes, aid engagement and socio-demographics. (Fielded by BMG Research, October 2017, N=5,008.)

The experimental designs were informed by DFID's summary [S2] of what they had taken from the research so far and what they wanted to address further. DFID specified various broad narratives (economic interests, global leadership, health security, and a general assertion that aid is in the national interest) and a number of specific messages, some existing and some new wordings. These were incorporated alongside the team's own research ideas; Professor Johns added variables by which to identify audiences more responsive to national-interests frames. After piloting, the team reported key findings to DFID, informing refinements for the main data collection [R6a].

That survey yielded a wide range of findings [R6b,c] which were condensed into four core insights for DFID [R6d]:

1. Specific projects are both more popular than aid in general *and* are more likely to convince British citizens that aid is in the national interest.
2. Mentioning the level of expenditure is counter-productive, eroding support for aid even when justified in terms of national interests.
3. Different audiences responded to different security threats:
 - a. *overall*, health security was the arena most likely to convince people of a national-interests case for aid;
 - b. *among the 'marginally engaged'* (DFID's primary target group), national and border security were more persuasive concerns.
4. General beats specific in claims about the domestic gains from aid. Specific predictions were not thought credible, partly because the causal chains (e.g. investment in infrastructure in Ethiopia creates jobs and wealth on the ground there, which boosts export opportunities for British firms, which creates jobs in the UK) are too complex.

Professor Johns also conducted a follow-up analysis in February 2018, breaking down responses according to a new schema for 'market segmentation' adopted by DFID, based on media consumption [R6e].

3. References to the research [can be supplied by HEI on request]

Publications

[R1] Johns, R. and Davies, G. A. M. (2012). Democratic peace or clash of civilizations? Target states and support for war in Britain and the United States. *Journal of Politics* 74(4), 1038-1052. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0022381612000643>

[R2] Davies, G. A. M. and Johns, R. (2013). Audience costs among the British public: The impact of escalation, crisis type and Prime Ministerial rhetoric. *International Studies Quarterly* 57(4), 725-737. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/isqu.12045>

[R3] Johns, R. and Davies, G. A. M. (2014). Coalitions of the willing? International backing and British public support for military action. *Journal of Peace Research* 51(6), 767-781. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0022343314544779>

[R4] Johns, R. and Davies, G. A. M. (2019). Civilian casualties and public support for military action: Experimental evidence. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 63(1), 251-281. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002717729733>

[R5] Lightfoot, S., Davies, G. A. M. and Johns, R. (2016). Needs and interests: Understanding the British public's balancing of aid priorities. Paper presented at workshop on *Public Opinion and Foreign Aid*, University of Essex, 28-30 April. (Available upon request).

Additional outputs

[R6] Collated documentation prepared for DfID including:

- a. Questionnaires and experimental wordings from main survey
- b. Presentation from dissemination to core DFID team, 20 October 2017
- c. Presentation from dissemination to wider DFID comms team, 15 December 2017
- d. Executive Summary of core recommendations from the research
- e. Excel spreadsheet reporting survey comparisons by levels of engagement

(Available upon request)

Related funding

[G1] Johns, R. and Davies, G. A. M., 'Foreign Policy Attitudes and Support for War Amongst the British Public', ESRC Award, 2009-2012, £243,000.

[G2] Johns, R., Dietrich, S., Lown, P., and Ward, H. 'Improving DFID's reading of the public opinion environment for overseas aid', IAA award, University of Essex, ESRC 2017-18, £15,000.

4. Details of the impact

The impact process fell into four broad stages: initial engagement, co-production of knowledge, presentation of findings, and updating of policy practice.

Engagement

Professor Johns presented the team's early findings about public aid priorities [R5] at a workshop at Essex in April 2016. This was attended by DFID's Head of Strategy and Insight (Communications) who noted the match with their policy interests and arranged a meeting at DFID on 7 July 2016 [S1]. The team presented the underpinning research [R1-5], resulting in a stated interest from DFID for collaboration with Johns and co-investigators [S2]. Findings would inform DFID's Insights team about the efficacy of their narratives and thus improve their communications strategy [S3a, b].

Co-production of knowledge

This is described in detail in Section 2. The research most directly underpinning the impact, i.e. the IAA-funded series of survey experiments testing DFID's national interests messaging, was co-produced with staff from DFID's communications division [R6].

Presentation of findings

The main findings were communicated via two meetings: first a debrief with the core DFID Insights team on 20 October 2017, and then a presentation to DFID's senior communications team -- the Heads of Strategy & Insight and of Corporate Communications; the Deputy Director of Strategic Communications & Employee Engagement; and an Evaluation & Branding Advisor -- on 15 December 2017 at the Department in Whitehall.

Updating policy practice

As summarised by a Communications Insight and Evaluations Adviser [S4a], the four core insights from Section 2 fell into two categories for DFID: #1 and #2 provided representative-sample confirmation of indications they had from focus groups; #3 and #4 were new insights. All four fed into the Department's communications practice.

The project's impact was thus achieved via a two-step process. First, research insights were used by DFID *to revise and update its guidance on communicating aid in the national interest*, the refreshed guidance then being circulated throughout DFID, notably its Communications Division. This dissemination process is summarised in a February 2018 e-mail from the then Head of Strategy & Insight [S5].

The second step was the *use of this refreshed guidance, and particularly our core insights, in writing Ministerial and Department communications*. DFID provided two specific examples of this via stories that it placed in the national media (thereby highlighting the reach of the redesigned communications) [S4b]. Example A reflects core insights #3b, #1 and #4: it focuses on national security, the primary concern of the marginally engaged, and it reports on a specific project but makes only general claims about the benefits to the UK. Example B reflects core insights #1 and #2: specific projects with tangible outcomes are reported on, with expenditure relegated to the subheading.

A letter from DFID's Director of Communications [S6] highlights the series '100 ways aid works' as another strand of communications influenced by our insights. A sample of those social media posts and videos provides further illustration of the way in which the core insights listed in Section 2 were used to shape DFID's communications [S7].

That same letter [S6] also summarises the broader uses and impact of this research. It attests that the project achieved its core aim of informing and thus improving the way that DFID talks about aid and the national interest. It is rare for academic insights to be injected so directly into government communications, and thus for them to have such reach.

Two aspects of that reach are worth emphasising. The first is within government. As the Director of Communications puts it, our insights are [text removed for publication] [S6] – that is, not only throughout DFID but also in other aid-spending departments. Second, the reach of the resulting communications is considerable. The #100waysaidworks videos were circulated by a DFID Twitter account with close to half a million followers. This included relevant players within the aid policy community as well as the wider public. As illustrated, the latter are also targeted by adverts and placed stories in high-circulation national newspapers such as *The Sun* and the *Guardian* online.

A postscript: the process described above all took place prior to DFID being folded into what became the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office. However, there is good reason to suppose that the impact is ongoing. This is partly because much of DFID's operation transferred into the new department. Above all, though, it is because the national interest agenda remains prominent in UK Aid communications – indeed, that agenda was a driving motivation behind the merger.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[S1] E-mail from the Head of Strategy and Insight inviting the research team to DFID for potential collaboration.

[S2] Letter from the Head of Strategy and Insight at DFID inviting Essex to collaborate on research.

[S3a] E-mail from DFID's Insight, Evaluation and Branding Advisors at DFID outlining their research interests.

[S3b] Document from DFID detailing the scope of the collaboration.

[S4a] E-mail from Communications Insight and Evaluations Adviser summarising DFID's reaction to the core findings and providing examples of their implementation in communications.

[S4b] DFID document 'Supporting our communications strategy' illustrating examples of communications designed using research insights.

[S5] E-mail from Head of Strategy and Insight outlining the uses of the research within DFID.

[S6] Letter from Director of Communications at DFID.

[S7] Annotated examples of DFID communications within the '100 ways aid works' series.