



Popping the Immigration Filter Bubble

Tips for reaching the
Moveable Middle on YouTube
(for immigration advocates
and content creators)

Contents

- 3 **Introduction**
 - 3 Why do this work?
 - 3 Who is our audience?
 - 3 How to use this guide
- 4 **Findings and Recommendations**
 - 4 The Messenger
 - 8 The Message
- 15 **Conclusion**

Why do this work?

At Define American, we believe that stories shape culture. We also believe that in order to build effective strategies, we as advocates need to understand the narratives already influencing public opinion. For this reason, three years ago, we decided to begin research into anti-immigration videos on YouTube. We wanted to understand if viral videos were impacting Americans' views on immigrants, and, if so, what messages they were spreading. Our research, detailed in [our report](#), “‘Immigration Will Destroy Us’ And Other Talking Points: Uncovering the tactics of anti-immigration messaging on YouTube,” reveals a network of videos steeped in white nationalism and packaged for the mainstream.

The tactics found in this network have provided a window into the online anti-immigration machine, and insights for how advocates can fight back. This style guide is a collection of findings and recommendations, meant for any digital content creators who are invested in giving immigrants and refugees a better story.

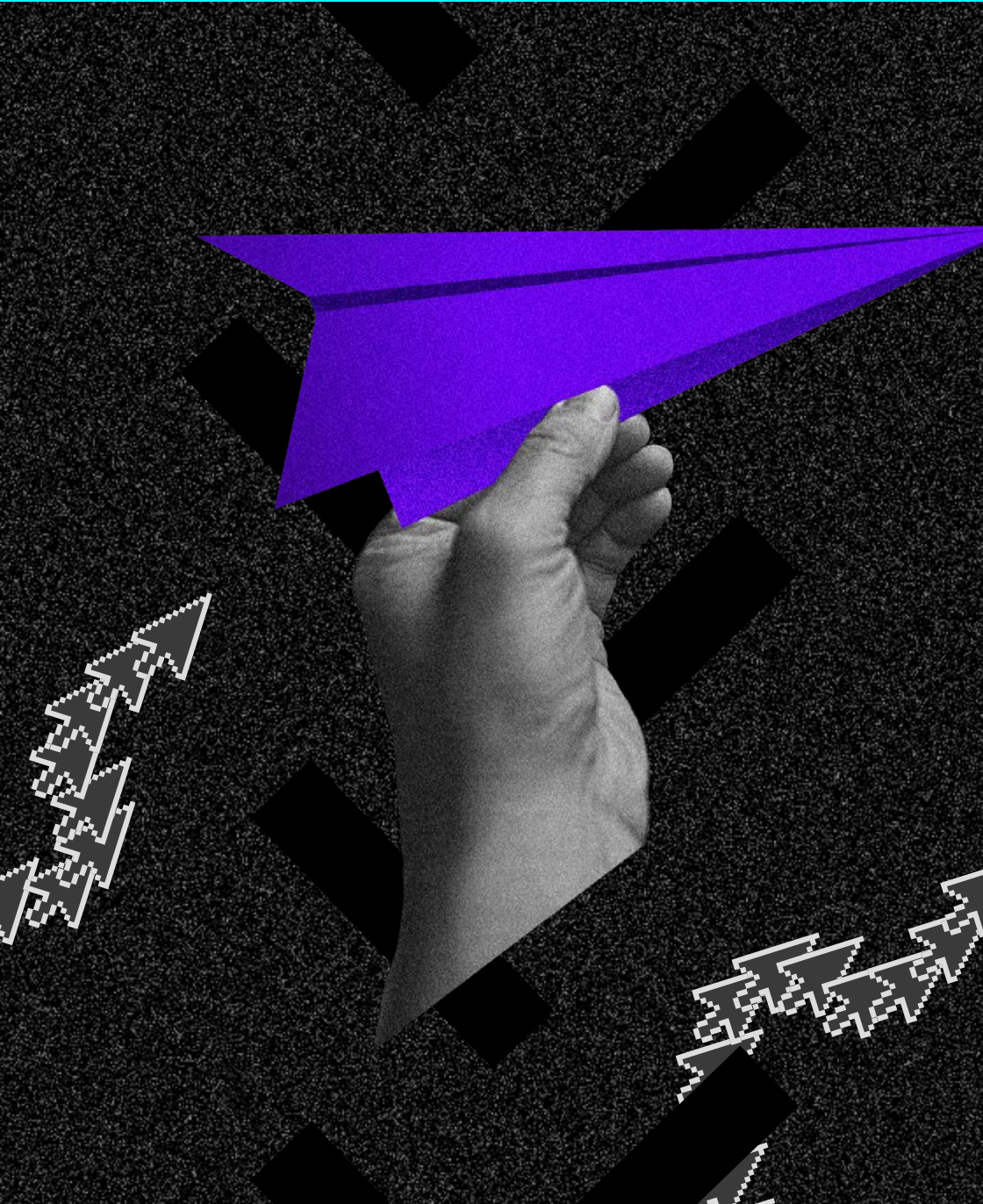
Who is our audience?

Immigration is an issue that can stir a great deal of passion. But it can also create a great deal of confusion. Immigration coverage in mainstream media is often chaotic. In a single news segment, the audience might be exposed to complicated policy discussions, images of human rights violations, and fear-mongering rhetoric. This portrayal has left a wide swath of the country bewildered and without a strong opinion on immigration. There's too much information, and not enough clarity. We call this group the “Moveable Middle,” and they are our target audience. The Moveable Middle has the power to sway elections and change our national conversation on immigration.

How to use this guide

There is no perfect formula for creating compelling content, and these recommendations are not trying to crack that code. The following findings and tips are informed by extensive research over a three-year period into effective messaging strategies for the Moveable Middle. The goal is not to reach the *largest* audience, the goal is to reach the *right* audience. These visual and messaging cues have been revealed as the visual language that the Moveable Middle finds most approachable.

In the digital age, we know that effective messaging campaigns online require hyper audience targeting. These are lessons we've taken not only from the anti-immigration network, but also from for-profit companies. Our goal is for content creators to view this guide as a framework for reaching a specific and important digital audience in our fight for the human rights of refugees, migrants, and displaced peoples.



The Messenger

When a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound? On social media, the answer is “no.” The best-crafted message campaigns will have absolutely no impact if there isn’t an equally well-crafted distribution strategy.

Our recommendation is to work with the infrastructures that already exist on social media, rather than building from scratch. The channel and messenger delivering the content are therefore pivotal in the success of reaching the Moveable Middle.

Finding #1: “Qualified” does not always equal “trusted”

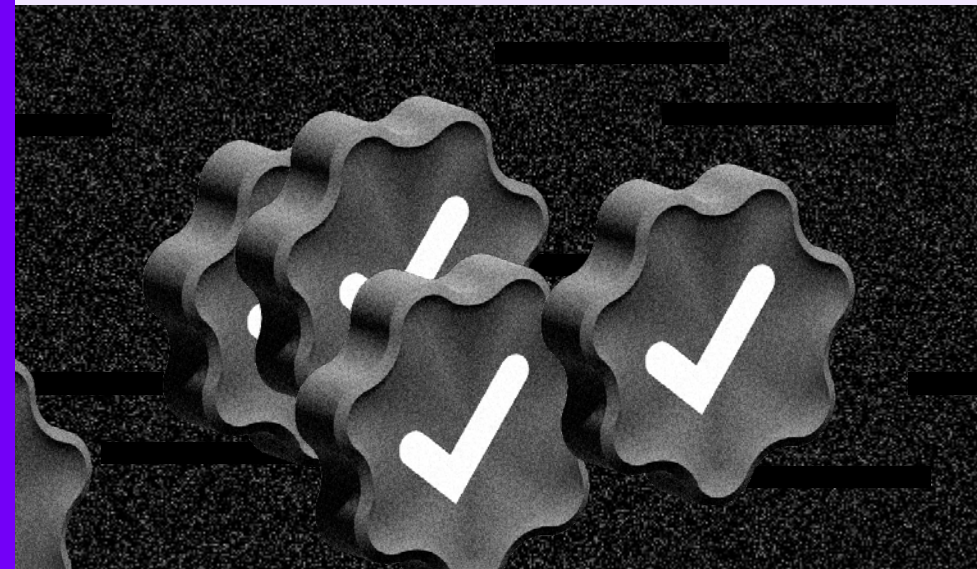
Tip:

Credentials are important to establish the messenger as qualified, but more is needed for the audience to feel they can trust the message.

Don't rely on impressive qualifications to win over audience trust. *Do* look to work with influencers who already have access to the audiences you'd like to reach and have already built that trust over time.

Our research shows that video hosts with impressive credentials such as “Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist” and “Princeton professor” were viewed as only slightly more trustworthy than someone with no credentials at all, even though the Moveable Middle viewed them as much more qualified.

In addition, Moveable Middle respondents said that they trusted influencers whom they follow more than professors or journalists, regardless of qualifications.



Finding #2: Influencer strategies are not one-size-fits-all

Tip:

Don't partner with influencers simply because they have a large subscriber count.

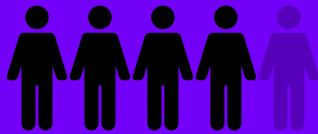
Partner with influencers who have the trust of your target audience.

Trust is personal and non-transferable. An influencer with a large following will not always be the right choice for a campaign if their audience or brand is not a good fit. Our research reveals that a high subscriber count can cause active distrust if the influencer is speaking to an audience outside of their fanbase. If the viewer does not personally know or follow the influencer themselves, the “influencer” credential can actually have a negative impact.



Beyond the Moveable Middle: A Template for Video Advocacy

80%



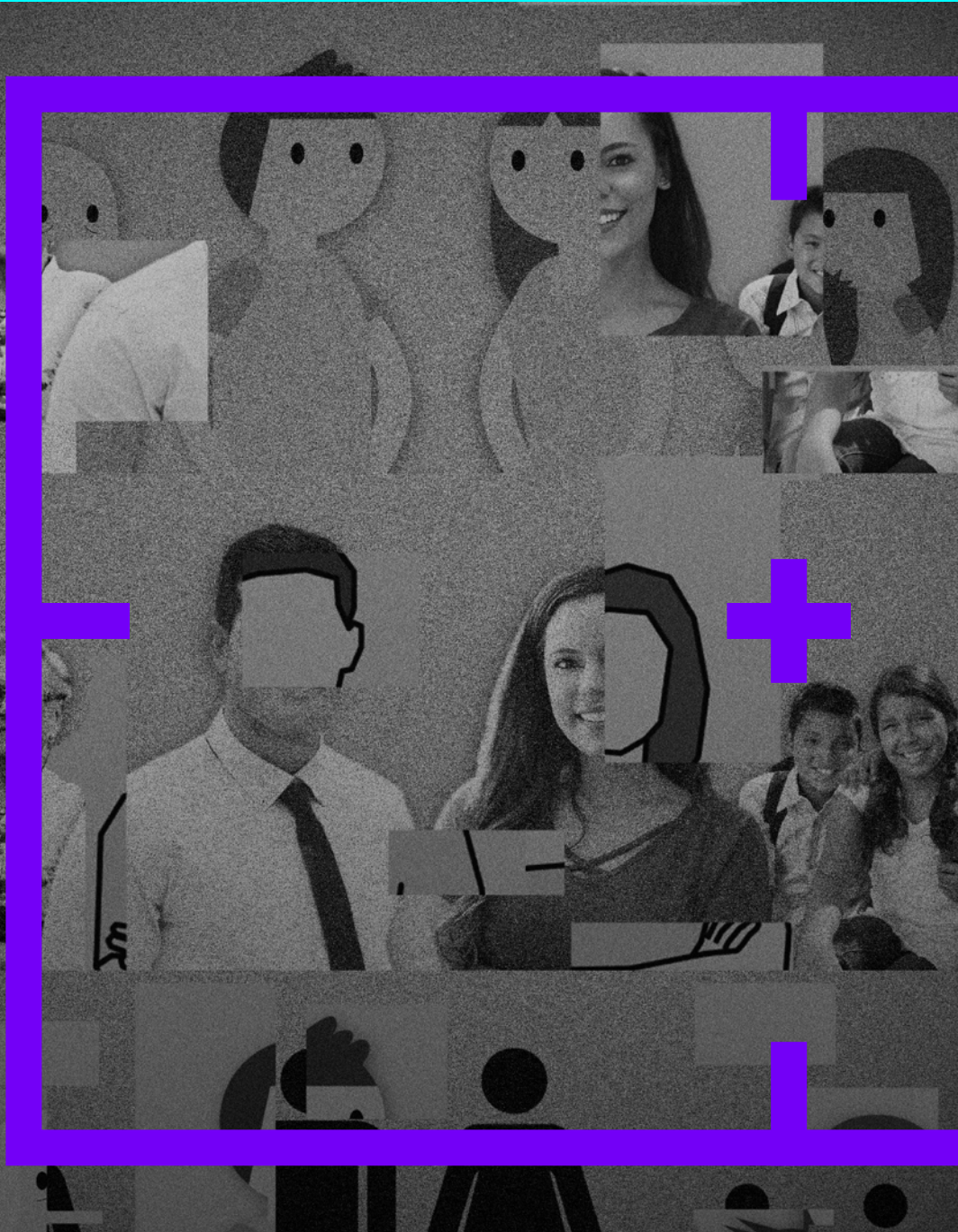
of YouTube viewers trust the algorithm to recommend their content.

Work with the algorithm to reach your target audience:

- 1** Identify your target audience.
- 2** Create a list of your target audiences' preferred content. What brands, influencers, genres, and type of content do they like?
- 3** Analyze the content. What trends or patterns emerge? What styles or patterns resonate?
- 4** Don't fight the algorithm, work with it by partnering with influencers who already reach your audience.
- 5** Produce content that feels organic to the style of your target audience's content ecosystem.



Findings and Recommendations



The Message

Well-placed distribution is critical for a successful video campaign, but it's also essential that the content resonate with the worldviews and values of the audience. In order to craft a powerful message, it's not enough to present a counterargument. We found that in order to make a message resonate, the underlying framing of the message must also match.

Finding #3: Empathy alone will not win

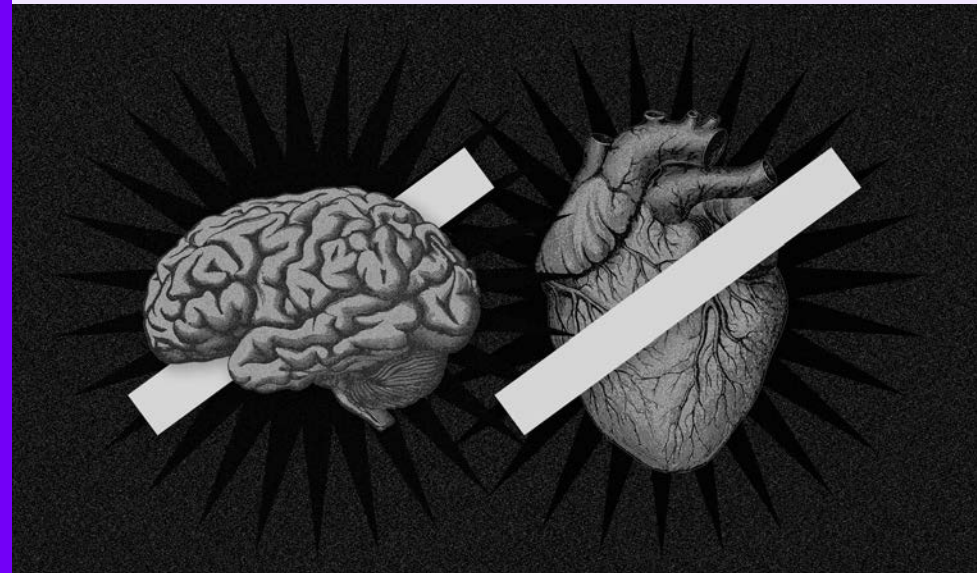
Tip:

Make sure content is grounded in common sense more than common decency.

“How this impacts all of us” is a more impactful message than “why this is morally wrong.”

Our research reveals that anti-immigration content on YouTube often sets up anti- vs. pro-immigration as a dichotomy of logic vs. emotion. By labeling the pro-immigration movement as illogical and emotional, the anti-immigration movement discredits the significance of empathy.

Content grounded in empathy-based arguments therefore may not resonate as strongly with audiences who have been exposed to anti-immigration content.



Finding #4: Aesthetics communicate culture. Understanding that visual language is critical

Tip:

Meet people where they are aesthetically. Always make sure that the content you're creating fits with the visual and tonal norms of your audiences' preferences.

Pay attention to the content creators who are popular with your target audience, and make sure your content's packaging feels aesthetically similar.

Our research revealed that aesthetic packaging impacts various ideological groups in different ways. For example, the Moveable Middle found our “semi-realistic animation” style most compelling, while the pro-immigration group responded more to a video featuring photographs.

Our explainer video compared to a PragerU explainer video



Still from “A Nation of Immigrants” from the highly popular, far-right YouTube channel Prager U



Still from “Are we Overreacting to Climate Change?” a Define American original video produced in a similar style

Finding #5: It's about legal immigration, too

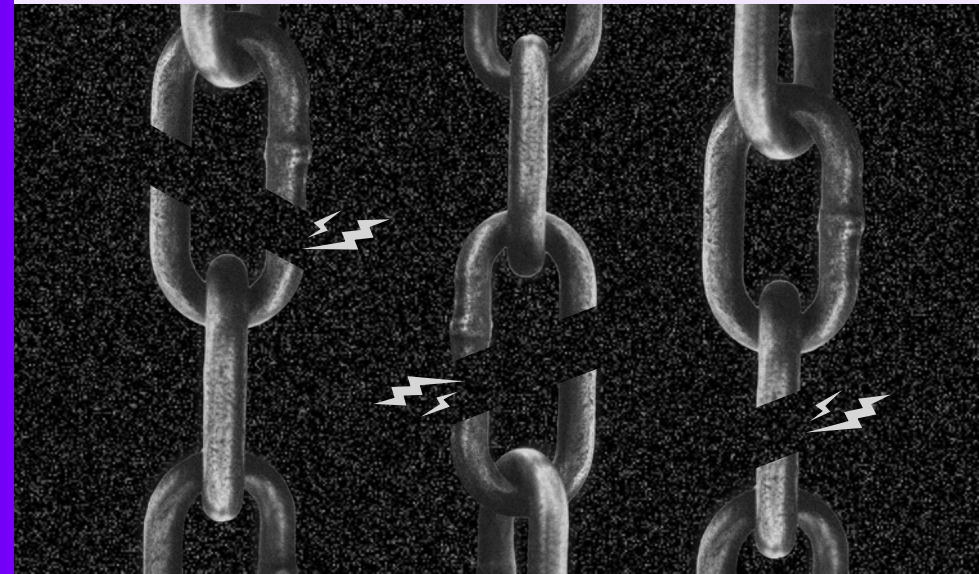
Tip:

Share more stories highlighting the positive role of legal immigration in our society, particularly putting tangible stories and real faces to family-based migration.

It's important to explain how this system actually works, and how it benefits all Americans.

The vast majority of immigrants in the United States hold legal status, despite the fact that most news media coverage on immigration focuses on the undocumented experience (Benkler et al., 2018). Our research revealed that there is also a growing anti-legal immigration movement in the form of critiques of existing immigration laws, particularly family-based migration (referred to as “chain migration.”)

Benkler, Y., Faris, R., & Roberts, H. (2018). Network propaganda manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American politics. Oxford University Press.



Finding #6: Anti-Muslim messaging is key to xenophobia

Tip:

Celebrating the inclusion and contributions of Muslim Americans in immigrant storytelling is critical for the movement.

Uplifting stories of religious tolerance and its fundamental role in our nation's founding could be impactful.

The threat to Christian values and identity is a central talking point in attacking legal migration. Anti-legal immigration narratives often rely on framing Islam as a threat to Christianity.



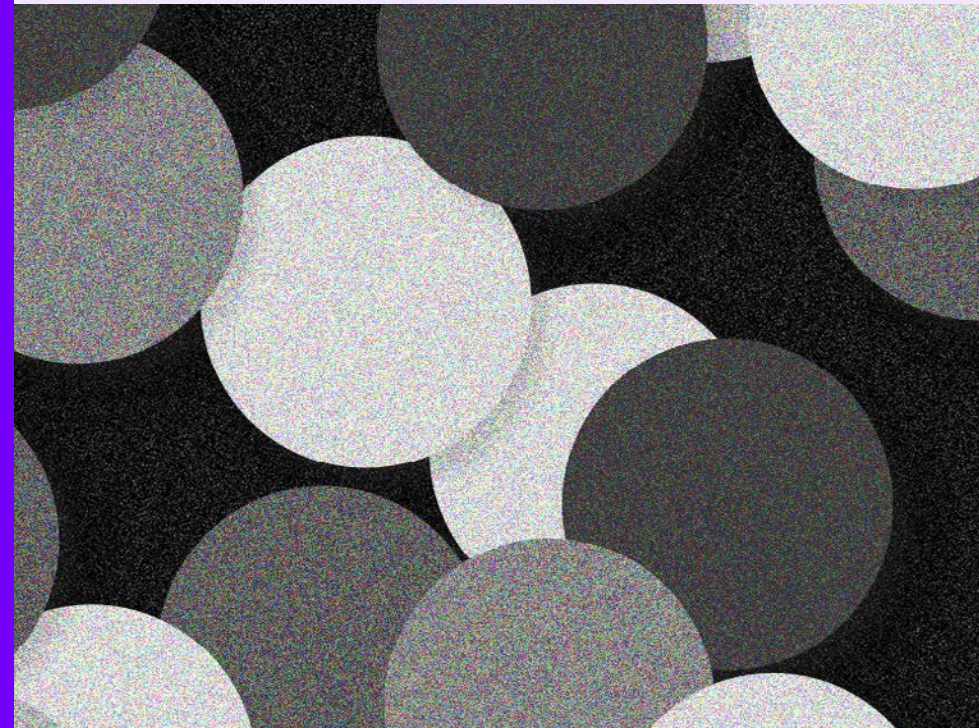
Finding #7: Illegal immigration is overwhelming portrayed as Latine

Tip:

Make sure to ground storytelling of the undocumented experience with diverse representation, including the Black, white, and AAPI communities.

Despite a diverse population, anti-immigration groups tend to portray undocumented immigrants exclusively as Latine.

This homogenization of the undocumented community is not only an erasure of whole groups of people, it also makes it easier for anti-immigration narratives to play off racism and stereotypes.



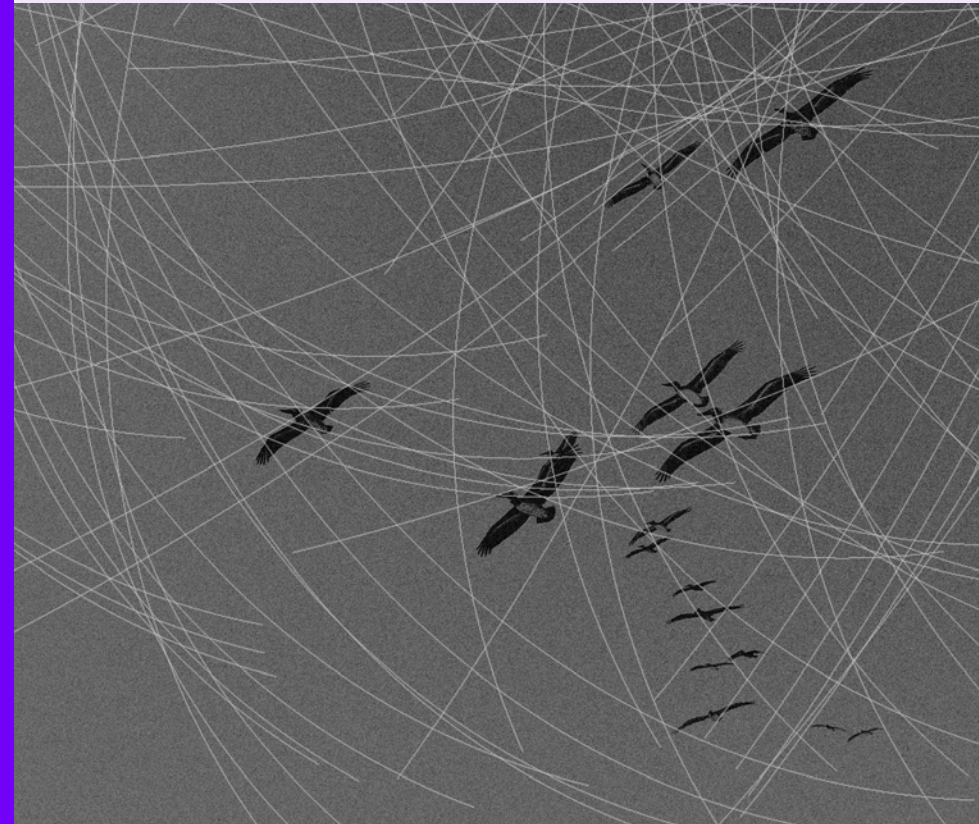
Finding #8: Europe is used as an example of how mass migration will destroy Western culture

Tip:

Highlight stories with clear narratives that contextualize U.S. immigration in relationship to global migration.

For example, draw a connection between U.S. immigration and the global climate crisis.

The far right has a cohesive and powerful narrative for how the migration crisis in Europe relates to immigration in the United States. Their frame is that tolerance of refugees is destroying Europe, and the United States is next.



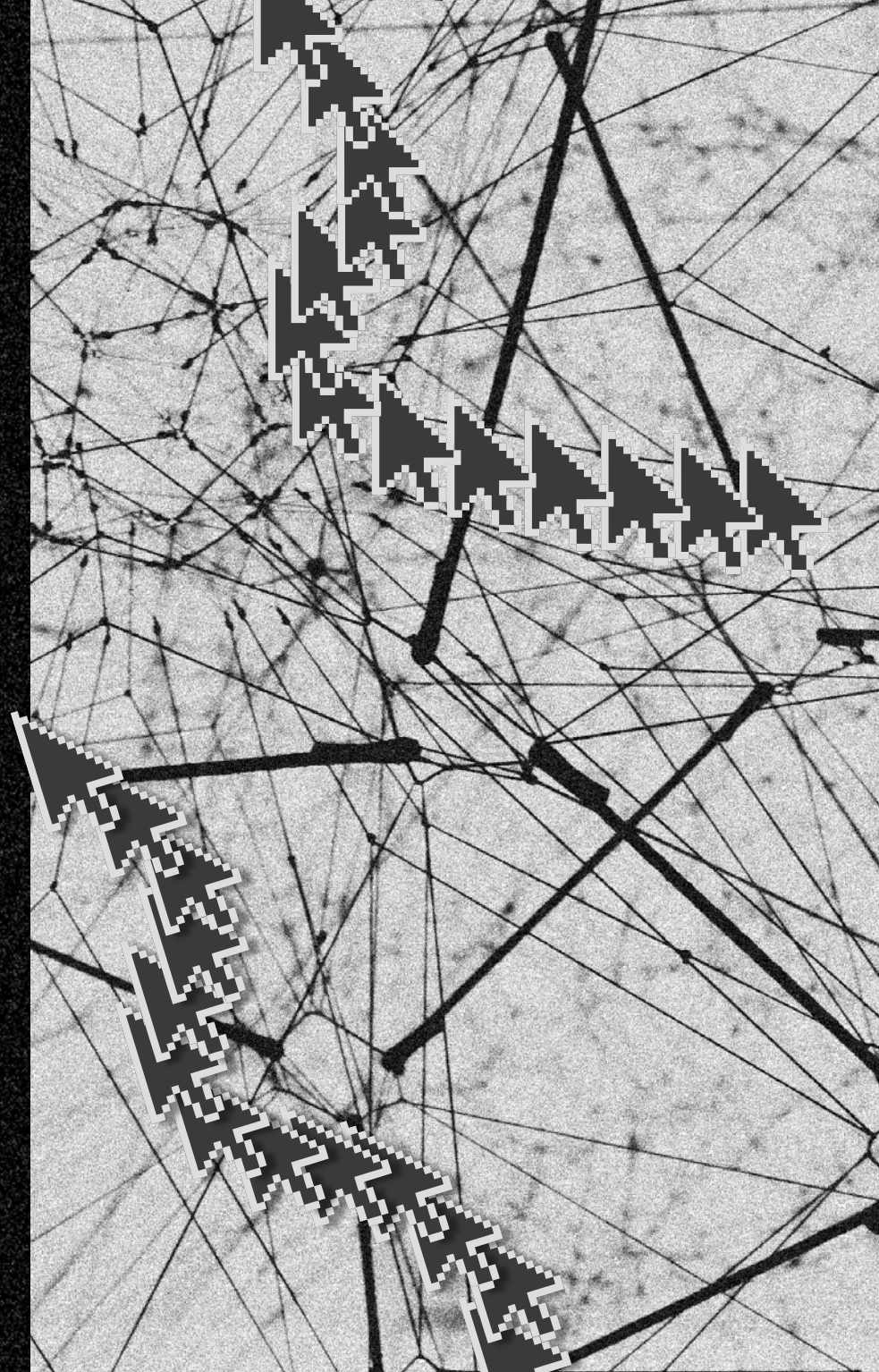
Conclusion

Shifting the digital narrative on immigration cannot be done by one advocacy group or one influencer. We hope these tips and tactics will encourage coalition and resource sharing with advocates across social justice networks, so that together we can shape a new story for immigrants to the U.S.

For more information about our methodology and research, please refer to [our larger research report](#).

Contact

To learn more about the style guide, contact Define American's Director of Digital Storytelling, Shauna Siggelkow, at shauna@defineamerican.com



Acknowledgments

Authors & Contributors

This style guide was written by Shauna Siggelkow.

Define American is led by Jose Antonio Vargas.

Define American digital storytelling and research departments: Shauna Siggelkow and Sarah E. Lowe.

Production support: William Johnston-Carter.

Research collaborators: Change Research, Swayable, futurePerfect Lab, Tubular, and Dr. Francesca Bolla Tripodi.

Design: Gabriel Lee.

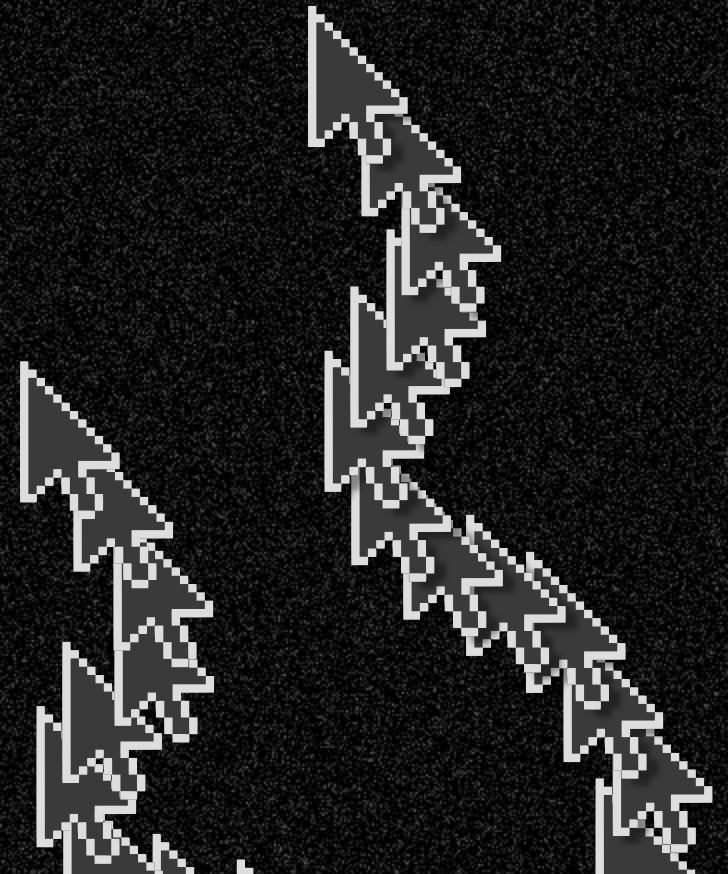
Special thanks to the entire Define American team.

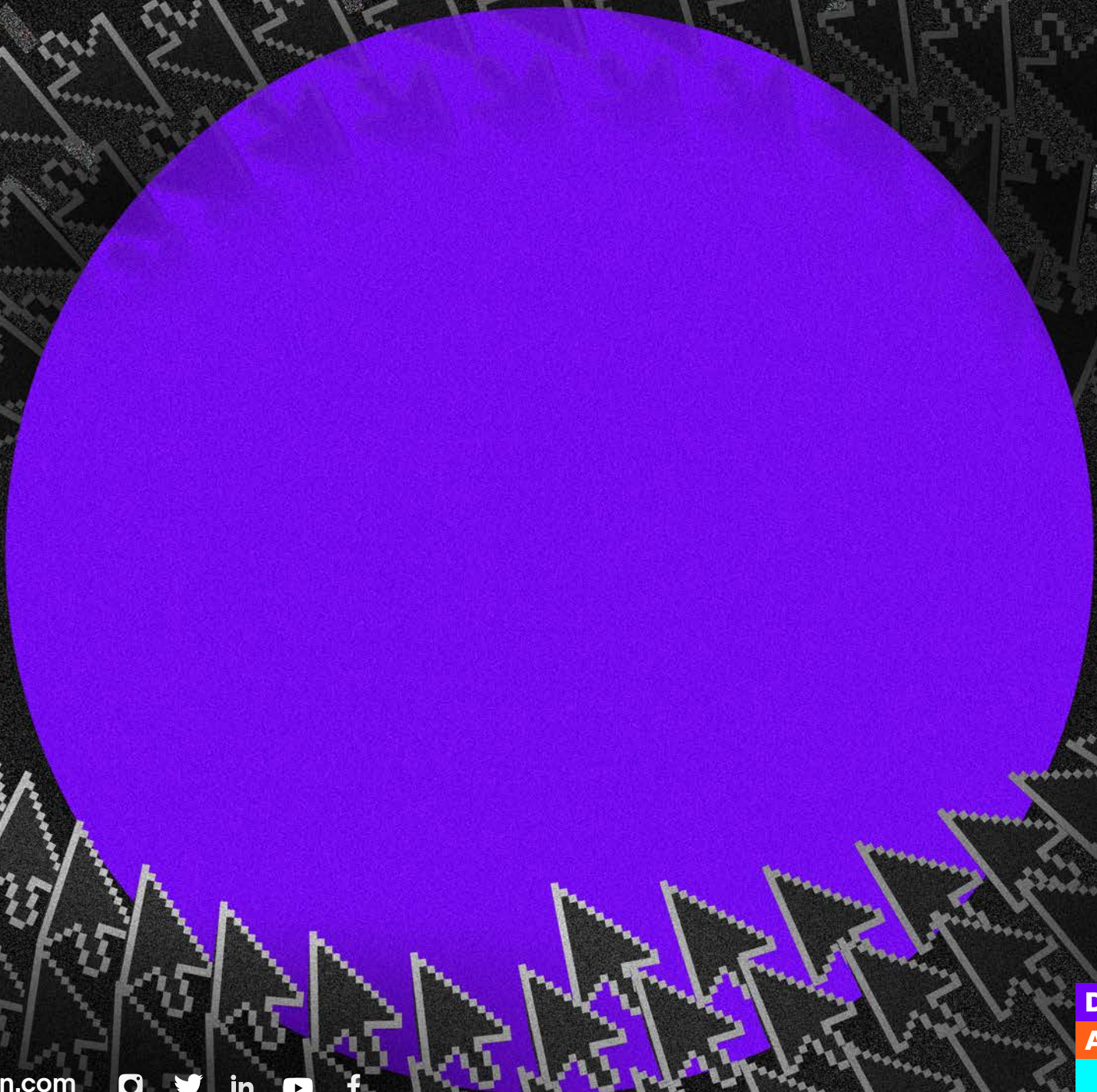
About Define American

Define American is a culture change organization that uses the power of narrative to humanize conversations about immigrants. Our advocacy within news, entertainment, and digital media is creating an America where everyone belongs.

Images

All images used in the report are the sole property of their creators. The still images and thumbnails are used under educational fair use guidelines, for the explicit purpose of supporting this guide.





defineamerican.com



DEFINE
AMERICAN

