July 2026 - The Clarus Project

The Clarus project brings together forensic scientists, academics, police, linguists, the public and other professionals across borders to understand how communication, professional culture, and decision-making influence the way digital evidence is handled.

The first part of the Clarus project has focused on identifying potential biases in digital forensic work. This includes looking at how professional background, organisational culture, and language shape the way investigators make decisions and communicate their findings. This Executive Summary discusses these aspects of our work with implications for practice.

Executive Summary for Deliverable 2.2: Organisational Culture

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Key Points

- Overall, systemic sources of bias may include, but are not limited to, organisational pressure, hierarchical dynamics, inconsistent practices, and superficial peer review and procedures for verification.

- We for example found variability in how digital devices (e.g., phones) were secured and handled, and type of communication (i.e., formal and informal). While standardisation is important, too rigid rules and guidelines may impact decisions and potentially lead to loss of vital evidence.

- To prevent miscommunication and bias at system level, awareness and knowledge of the existence and content of these types of system bias in digital forensic work more systematically is encouraged.

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Background & Context

System bias relates to structures, processes, and cultures within and across organisations that collaborate in digital forensic work. Still, until now, system bias has remained relatively unexplored in research literature and less known among practitioners.

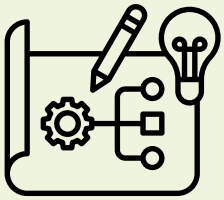
We set out to investigate system bias to enhance the general knowledgebase in digital forensic work, and by this, contribute to the objectivity and fairness of police and forensic practice.

Methods: How we did it

First, we designed and tested a case study of how to handle digital evidence and cross-border exchange relating to a terrorist case. Then five partners ran it in their partner countries before we analysed survey and focus group data.

For the quantitative data, frequency distributions were computed to analyse the distributions across survey items within each country, and cross-tables were conducted to compare partner countries. Due to the low number of participants, statistical tests of significance were not performed.

For the qualitative data, a deductive and inductive approach was applied to condense relevant parts of the focus group interviews into thick descriptions. Coding check-ins were performed to ensure alignment with partners, and inferences made were frequently cross checked between the researchers, mindful of interpretive bias.



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Key Research Findings

We found that across partner countries, a set of cultural and organizational dynamics (e.g., basic assumptions and shared values) combined shape the handling of digital evidence. Some of the main findings were that system bias in digital forensic work, when seen from organisational culture, may be introduced in the form of:

- Insufficient procedural standardisation
- Tendency to combine formal and informal communication
- Trivialisation or denial of miscommunication and bias
- Lack of feedback and reflection culture
- Limited cross-disciplinary knowledge
- Training needs

Procedural approaches vary, in terms of their reliance on standardised procedures, the scope afforded to professional discretion, and the extent to which digital forensic expertise is integrated into investigations.

Communication practices combine informal and formal channels, reflecting a pragmatic approach that may support efficiency but can also reduce transparency and accountability when informal exchanges are not systematically documented or formalised.

Practitioners express confidence that miscommunication and bias are limited in their work, even though accounts and survey data indicate that such factors can influence their judgements and decision making.

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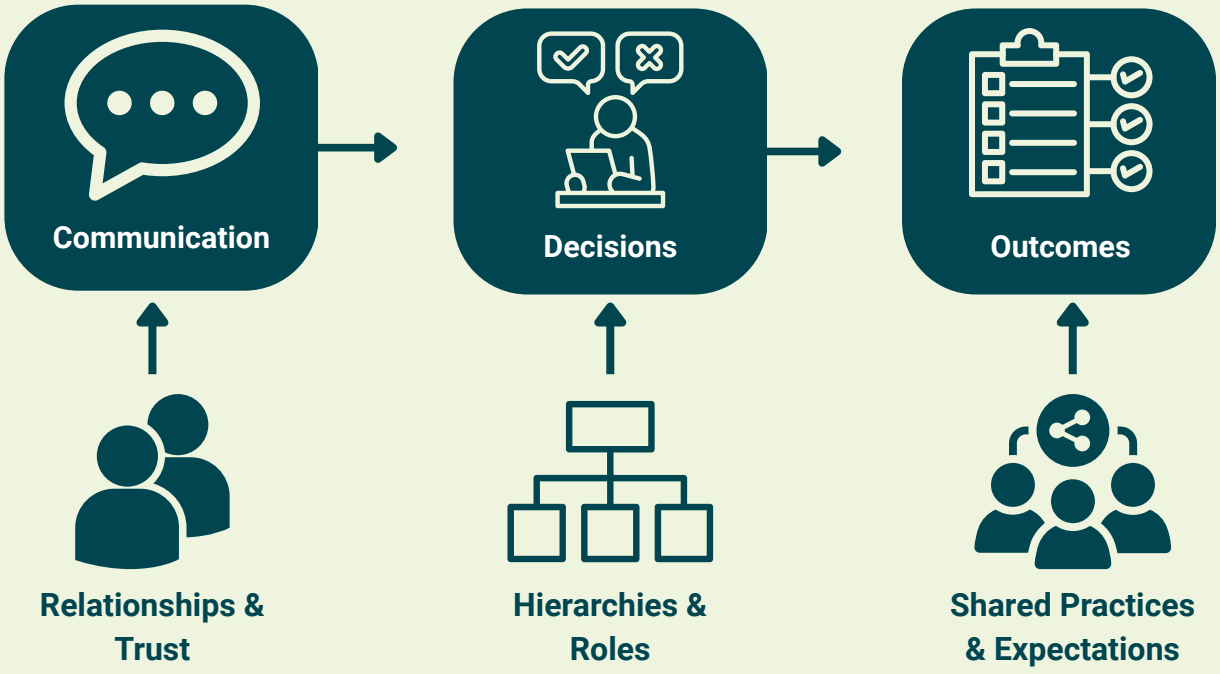
Implications

- Strengthening procedures that include framing system bias as a shared challenge.
- Institutionalising mechanisms for training and other organisational learning activities, such as structured debriefs, joint seminars, and reflective dialogue.
- Openness to the existence and shared vulnerability to system bias in cross-disciplinary digital evidence practices.

Organisational culture shapes how people work together.



Full preliminary version of this deliverable available to read by scanning the QR code below or visiting our website at: claruseu.net/project-outputs/

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