September 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 and reducing 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 2.3: Report on Language Use

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Key Points

- Communication is recognized as being important part of the work in the digital forensic context.
- Practitioners use a variety of methods of communication to discuss digital evidence.
- Informal communication was prevalent and often supported the work carried out by relevant practitioners, although on occasion it was necessitated by lack of cross-disciplinary knowledge, lack of clarity, or divergent terminology.

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Background & Context

Digital evidence is collected, handled and analyzed by various professionals who need to collaborate with each other. Different counties have specific procedures, but it is often through interaction that a lot of actual work happens.

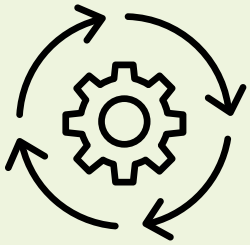
Clarus project set out to investigate patterns of interaction. This supplements the wider view of organizational culture, as described in Deliverable D2.2.

Methods: How we did it

Data for the deliverable come from a case study developed for the stage of the project concerned with investigating organizational culture more broadly. As part of the research, a case study was developed where relevant practitioners in five partner counties took part in a focus group replicating a journey of digital evidence in a hypothetical scenario.

The scenario also involved other types of evidence and included collaboration between different practitioners as well as touched on the possibility of cross-border exchange of information.

The transcripts of focus groups were analyzed thematically, with the support of content-oriented discourse analysis. In particular, references to communication, or in other words, metacommentary, that is explicit comments about language, formed basis of the analysis.



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Key Research Findings

One of the key findings related to the recognized importance of communication more widely. Participants emphasized the role of communication in their working practices. However, some of them noted that this explicit engagement with the importance of communication was only possible thanks to the research environment.

Having considered the significance of communication, the report identified a range of different modes and media used to communicate in the process of gathering, handling and evaluating evidence. Phone calls were by far the most referred to medium of communication, praised for their efficacy.

However, the reliance of phone conversations runs the risk of introducing contextual information which may lead to bias. At the same time, written communication is also widely used to document the process, sometimes in prescribed formats, such as examiner reports. In addition to technology mediated communication, whether through phone or in writing, participants discussed the importance of face-to-face communication, which can foster good working relationships but also can remain undocumented.

In addition to the specific forms of communication, the report also discusses the aspects of tenor of communication, understood as the link between language use and participants involved. This has important implications for the perceptions of formality, with different levels of formality being used in the process. Similarly, factors such as familiarity with people or communicating with different audiences affect clearly how individuals communicate.

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Key Research Findings - Continued

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One of the specific insights gained through research is the focus on perceived communicative challenges, and the report identifies three key areas: lack of cross-disciplinary knowledge, lack of relevant detail or clarity, and divergent terminology. This suggests therefore that the challenges in communication extend beyond purely linguistic issues and relate to working practices and organizational practices more widely

HOW PEOPLE COMMUNICATE:

Phone Calls

Widley used and considered effective

Sometimes can introduce contextual information which may lead to bias

Written Communication

Used to document the process formally

Often in prescribed formats, such as examiner reports

Face-to-face

Can foster good working relationships

Can be valuable but often remains undocumented

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IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION AND PERCEIVED CHALLENGES IN COMMUNICATION

IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION

Successful communication can potentially prevent errors that result from miscommunication.
Professionals recognize this but struggle to fully articulate the specific mechanisms through which successful communication is facilitated. Increasing professionals' **understanding of awareness of language** will enable them "...to reflect on the purpose of spoken and written language, and importantly how that purpose is achieved in the specific contexts of the production/consumption of the text." (Darics, 2022, p. 6).

PERCEIVED CHALLENGES IN COMMUNICATION

Lack of cross-disciplinary knowledge

- Professionals have limited understanding of roles and responsibilities of others.
- Limited understanding leads to uncertainty about procedures and next steps.
- This lack of understanding generates additional interactions needed to clarify specific points.

Lack of relevant detail or clarity

- Evidence requests lack relevant detail or are unclear.
- This creates a need for additional contacts and follow-up interactions.
- Requests for clarification may create potential tensions between professionals.
- Who determines what information is relevant for an investigation?

Terminology

- Differences in knowledge and expertise create challenges with terminology, as professionals understand and interpret terms differently.
- This creates misunderstandings about technological terms and practices.
- To prevent misunderstandings, a shared lexicon is needed to ensure that professionals use the same technical vocabulary.

AT A GLANCE: KEY CHALLENGES

1. **Lack of cross-disciplinary knowledge**
2. **Lack of relevant detail or clarity**
3. **Terminology**

KEY TAKEAWAY

Perceived challenges in communication extend beyond language issues but often involve the lack of understanding the process.

Read the full deliverable for more in-depth research findings.

Implications

- More explicit reflection on communicative practices may be beneficial for practitioners to understand some of the key challenges in processes.
- Informal communication is integral to the workflow, particularly when individuals seek clarification or require managing cases in a timely manner, but practitioners need to be attuned to potential sources of bias.
- A lot of interaction is the result of limited cross-disciplinary knowledge, lack of relevant detail, or wrong terminology. Upskilling in those areas may lead to more efficient working practices.

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

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