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Lessons from History for Counter- Terrorism Strategic Communications

Drawing on the Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communication (CTSC) Project's research paper *A Brief History of Propaganda during Conflict*, this Policy Brief lays out the key policy-relevant lessons for developing effective counter-terrorism strategic communications. It presents a framework of interrelated macro-, mezzo- and micro-level considerations for maximizing the efficacy of not just a strategic communications campaign but message design. Historical examples are drawn upon to illustrate their practical application. The Policy Brief concludes by analysing four key strategic-policy principles arguing that a counter-terrorism strategic communications campaign is more likely to be successful if it is based on the cumulative effects of a multidimensional messaging strategy.

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About ICCT

The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) is an independent think and do tank providing multidisciplinary policy advice and practical, solution-oriented implementation support on prevention and the rule of law, two vital pillars of effective counter-terrorism. ICCT's work focuses on themes at the intersection of countering violent extremism and criminal justice sector responses, as well as human rights related aspects of counter-terrorism. The major project areas concern countering violent extremism, rule of law, foreign fighters, country and regional analysis, rehabilitation, civil society engagement and victims' voices. Functioning as a nucleus within the international counter-terrorism network, ICCT connects experts, policymakers, civil society actors and practitioners from different fields by providing a platform for productive collaboration, practical analysis, and exchange of experiences and expertise, with the ultimate aim of identifying innovative and comprehensive approaches to preventing and countering terrorism.

Introduction

There has been a tendency in the counter-terrorism academic and strategic-policy fields to impulsively assume that the challenges presented by 21st century extremist propaganda are unique and that history provides little more than an interesting footnote to the present. Such a perspective, in being both conceptually and thematically short-sighted, risks ignoring important lessons that can be drawn from a broader historical perspective. The Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications (CTSC) Project's *A Brief History of Propaganda during Conflict*¹ placed the current challenge of understanding and confronting extremist propaganda into an historical context and identified a number of pertinent policy-relevant lessons for developing effective counter-terrorism strategic communications campaigns.

Macro-, Mezzo- & Micro-Level Lessons

Persuasive communication has been partnered with war for millennia. The historical evolution of propaganda during war has been driven by three persistent factors: (i.) advancements in communication technologies, (ii.) developments in military strategy and technology, and (iii.) the changing relationship between political elites and the people. Recurring trends emerge from this history that are largely products of the interplay of these three persistent factors. Despite changes in socio-political dynamics and extraordinary advancements in communication and military technologies, some fundamental challenges have cyclically emerged throughout this history from how to harness the latest communication technology and with what message, to how best to synchronise words and actions. It is a long history that is ignored at the peril of, at best, reinventing the wheel or, at worst, committing avoidable mistakes. It is useful to begin by outlining a framework of interrelated macro-, mezzo- and micro-level considerations for developing effective counter-terrorism strategic communications that are drawn from the history of propaganda during conflict (Figure 1).

¹ Ingram, H. J. "A Brief History of Propaganda during Conflict: Lessons for Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications", *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 6 (2016), <http://icct.nl/publication/a-brief-history-of-propaganda-during-conflict-a-lesson-for-counter-terrorism-strategic-communications/>.

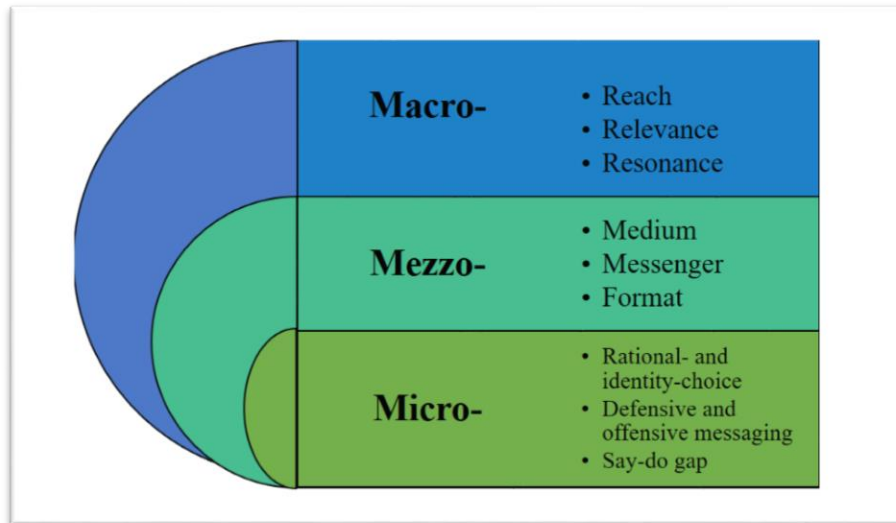


Figure 1: Macro-, Mezzo- and Micro- Strategic Communications Considerations

Macro-Level Considerations

In the broadest sense, three factors are crucial to maximising the potential *impact* of strategic communication efforts – whether a single message or the broader campaign itself. These macro-factors are represented by the 3Rs: *reach*, which is the ability of a message to access target audiences, *relevance*, referring to the timeliness of the message and its significance within the context of immediate situational factors, and *resonance*, which is the message’s influence on audience perceptions typically generated by leveraging deeper identity and socio-historical factors. Central to these macro-level considerations is a need to identify and understand the audiences that will be directly and indirectly targeted by a messaging campaign – friends, foes and neutrals. Only with a nuanced understanding of those audiences can proper consideration be given to not only how best to reach but what type of messaging is likely to be relevant and resonate with them. Indeed, given how messaging tends to be disseminated within and across social networks (both on- and offline), a message’s reach can be significantly increased if it is deemed relevant and resonates with a target audience (e.g. retweets on Twitter). These basic considerations of reach, relevance and resonance have been central to messaging campaigns from the Ancients to Da’esh because they are fundamental to effective communication.

Mezzo-Level Considerations

Building on those broad macro-level foundations, the next set of considerations relates to the specific medium, messenger and format of the message. The medium or means of communication needs to be selected based on maximising the reach of the message to target audiences. Inevitably, using a single medium, even if it is the latest technology, will be inefficient for maximising a message’s reach. For example, Protestant reformers in the 16th century may have used the latest printing press technology to reach increasingly larger and more geographically disparate audiences but oration remained crucial to spreading their message due to widespread illiteracy.² Similarly, an overemphasis on using the latest social media tools (e.g. Twitter) not only ignores target

² For example, see “Social media in the 16th century: How Luther went viral”, *The Economist*, 17 December 2011, <http://www.economist.com/node/21541719>.

audience members who may not be regular social media users but is reliant on that target network sharing the message amongst peers. Ideally, multiple mediums need to be deployed that are selected on the basis of not only the target audience they are designed to reach but how those various communication mediums compensate for the respective limitations of any one medium in isolation.

Distinct from the functional medium of communication, the messenger selected for delivering the message is a crucial mezzo-level consideration. Whether a message will be attributed (i.e. author truthfully identified) or unattributed (i.e. author unidentified or false) is the first consideration and the larger research paper showed how both types of messaging are crucial in a modern communications campaign.³ During the World Wars and the Cold War, Western powers disseminated both attributed and unattributed messaging – often synchronised with broader messaging efforts and actions in the field – to great effect.⁴ Regardless, the relevance and resonance of a message will rely heavily upon whether the messenger of that message is deemed a credible source by the target audience. The War on Terror offers countless examples of how a misalignment of message and messenger undercut the efficacy of a messaging effort. For example, Bin Laden represented a powerful messenger for Al-Qaeda’s message to sympathisers thanks to his carefully managed image of piety and humility. In contrast, officials from secular western governments engaging in counter-proselytising rhetoric about what is and is not ‘true’ Islam are both very unlikely to resonate with Muslims and renders such messaging vulnerable to effective counter-messaging.⁵

The format used to present a message is a vital consideration for maximising its effect on target audiences. Messaging can be delivered using an enormous variety of formats from spoken, sung and written word to still and moving imagery. Included in considerations of format is whether the message is formally or informally communicated; a decision that will ultimately reflect other macro and mezzo factors. The American Revolutionaries used a diverse array of formats in their information war against the British from poetry and ballads to leaflets, cartoons and speeches.⁶ In the 21st century, groups like Al-Qaeda and Da’esh have used carefully produced videos, online magazines, speeches and *nasheeds* (hymns) in an effort to appeal to their constituents.

Micro-Level Considerations

Finally, a range of micro-level considerations need to be factored into the design of the message itself. While these factors are also important for the broader strategic communications campaign, the following four points are examined from the perspective of message design.

³ H. J. Ingram, “A Brief History of Propaganda during Conflict”.

⁴ H. J. Ingram, “A Brief History of Propaganda during Conflict”, pp.16-19 (World War II) and pp.20-24 (Cold War).

⁵ Anwar al-Awlaki’s “Battle of the Hearts and Minds” is a pertinent example of counter-messaging against Western Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) strategies. For an audio of this lecture go to: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XmXrJuBsSbl>.

⁶ H. J. Ingram, “A Brief History of Propaganda during Conflict”, pp.10-12.

Rational- and Identity-Choice Messaging

Messaging should always be designed and deployed to have a particular effect on a target audience. Inevitably, the desired effect of a messaging campaign will be to shape audience perceptions or behaviour. This is broadly achieved with messaging that is calibrated to appeal to the audience's rational-choice (based on a cost-benefit consideration of options) and/or identity-choice (based on considerations of one's identity) decision-making processes. Ideally, a variety of messaging will be deployed as part of a strategic communications campaign that makes both rational- and identity-choice appeals. This both increases the potential for the messaging campaign to appeal to the broadest spectrum of motivational drivers in the target audience and, if synchronised effectively, align rational- and identity-choice decision-making processes amongst audience members. Messaging campaigns that have successfully mobilised supporters to engage in action almost inevitably deploy both rational- and identity-choice messaging. Even during the Crusades, when one may expect identity-choice messaging to have had a monopoly, rational-choice appeals – such as promises of debt relief and collection of war loot – played a significant role in appealing to and mobilising supporters. Similarly, Da'esh fuses both rational- and identity-choice messaging across its propaganda campaign which may align rational- and identity-choice decision-making processes in its supporters helping to explain, at least in part, the seemingly rapid radicalisation of its supporters from ordinary citizens to active militants.

Defensive and Offensive Messaging

Many governments around the world are focussed on the issue of how to develop effective counter-narratives against the extremist propaganda of groups like Al-Qaeda and Da'esh. However, it is important to recognise that counter-narratives are an inherently defensive type of messaging, i.e. it is messaging designed and deployed in response to an adversary's messaging. In addition to defensive messaging, offensive messages designed to deliver your message objectives, control the 'narrative' competition and, hopefully, elicit defensive counter-messaging from adversaries should be an essential component of a counter-terrorism strategic communications campaign. During World War II, it was Allied deployment of offensive messaging, synchronised with politico-military actions, that proved crucial to turning the momentum of the 'information war' in its favour and away from the Nazis.⁷ Indeed, the ratio of defensive versus offensive messaging – with a prioritisation upon the latter – may represent a useful metric for gauging the dominance of one side over the other in the information theatre.

Say-Do Gap

A common trend in the history of propaganda during conflict is the deployment of messaging that is designed to highlight the disparity between an adversary's words and actions. A corollary to this type of messaging is communiques that highlight how one's actions match one's words. Minimising one's own say-do gap while exacerbating that of adversaries is a strategy designed to directly address the issue of comparative credibility. This is of more than merely symbolic significance. In lethally uncertain environments, such as during war, the actor who is deemed most credible is likely to be more trusted and imbue their audience with a greater sense of certainty. This may

⁷ For more see W. Carroll, *Persuade or Perish* (Boston: The Riverside Press, 1948).

contribute to a significant advantage in the competition for popular support. Indeed, throughout the so-called War on Terror, it was often the West's perceived say-do gap – whether the use of torture in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, the trumped up case for the war in Iraq or 'redlines' in Syria not backed up by military action – that was leveraged in propaganda by Al-Qaeda and its affiliates. In contrast, Ronald Reagan's *National Security Decision Directive 75* outlined his administration's strategy for defeating the Soviet Union and demonstrated a deep appreciation for the importance of synchronising narrative and action as a means to compound desired effects in the field.⁸

First-, Second- and Third-Order Effects

While the potential 'blowback' effects (i.e. negative repercussions) of imprudent politico-military actions is broadly recognised in the field, misguided messaging can have inadvertent second- and third-order effects whose impact can be just as devastating for winning 'hearts and minds'. *A Brief History of Propaganda during Conflict* was littered with examples of the 'blowback' created by ill-advised or short-sighted messaging. For example, during World War I, British atrocity propaganda played a significant role in recruitment efforts and winning the support of neutrals. However, when it became clear after the war that British messaging had regularly perpetuated lies, it had enormous repercussions for not only how future strategic communications efforts would be designed but imbued the activity itself with negative connotations that persist to this day. For example, during World War II there was both an initial hesitancy to report and a scepticism to believe stories of Nazi atrocities. In the 21st century, the propaganda of militant Islamist groups is often designed to elicit ill-conceived counter-narratives from their adversaries – a type of 'baiting' strategy – that is then leveraged in waves of secondary messaging.

Four Key Strategic-Policy Principles

Drawing on the macro-, mezzo- and micro-level considerations for developing counter-terrorism strategic communications, the efficacy of a strategic communications campaign is more likely to be successful if it is based on the cumulative effects of a multidimensional messaging strategy. Four key strategic-policy principles emerge:

1. *Produce a diversity of messaging that leverage rational- and identity-choice appeals which are deployed both defensively and offensively (with an emphasis on the latter).*

Communication campaigns tend to be more successful when they combine a diverse array of messaging to cater for what are inevitably audiences characterised by diverse motivational and perceptual traits. Put simply, different people will be attracted to different messages, hence there is no 'silver bullet', making the development of a varied combination of messages essential. Campaigns that focus on one message automatically restrict their effectiveness by only appealing to particular motivational drivers within their target audience. Moreover, combinations of messages, especially if carefully synchronised across the campaign, can be mutually reinforcing and amplify their effects. The result being that the sum of the campaign is greater than its parts.

⁸ National Security Decision Directive 77: Management of Public Diplomacy relative to national security, 14 January 1983, http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB177/03_NSDD-77.pdf.

This variety can manifest in several ways but two are particularly important. First, messaging should be calibrated to make both rational- and identity-choice appeals to target audiences. Second, a strategic communications campaign should include defensive and offensive messages. The former is necessary to rebut and neutralise the adversaries' messaging. However, priority should be given to offensive messaging as a means to take control of not just the narrative war and the initiative in shaping how the conflict is perceived but force one's adversary onto the defensive.

Overall, effective messages are inevitably credible messages. Without credibility the relevance and resonance of communications may evaporate. To do this, messaging must always be based on the truth and, crucially, correspond to realities on the ground. For example, offensive and defensive messaging that points out the difference between what is said and what is done, the so-called 'say-do-gap', is a potent messaging tool.

2. All messaging should be cohered by core themes or, ideally, an overarching narrative.

Whilst a plurality of messages is fundamental for a successful communication campaign, these messages must be inter-connected and inter-related, building to support a coherent and over-arching message. In order to assure this, communiqués must be based on a set of core themes or ideally a grand narrative (and not the reverse). Without this foundation, messages risk appearing ad hoc, rendering the overall message at best unclear and confusing, and at worst contradictory. Constructing the messages around a grand narrative, creates a set of inter-locking messages that reinforce each other, and thus promotes the core message.⁹

3. Use a variety of mediums for communication to maximise the message's reach, timeliness and targeting.

Whilst the first two principles have focussed on the message itself, the third focusses on the means of delivering that message. As well as a variety of messages, a variety of mediums of communication should be deployed. Communication campaigns should exploit a multitude of appropriate means of communication (e.g. TV, radio, print, social media, leaflets and word of mouth) to not only effectively connect the relevant message to the right target audience but compensate for the limitations of any single communications medium. Moreover, different means of communication may be more effective at reaching different audiences. Hence a combination of mediums promises both deeper audience penetration and facilitates message repetition and re-enforcement. It is important, however, to consider the implications of the medium for who is targeted, when and how to avoid 'blowback' effects. Matching the medium, messenger and format to the message and target audience is likely to significantly increase its reach, relevance and resonance.

4. To maximise the intended effects of strategic communications efforts and minimise inadvertent second and third order effects, messaging should be synchronised with strategic-policy/politico-military efforts and seek to nullify the effects of the adversary's activities.

Counter-terrorism strategic communications should not be developed or deployed in isolation and must always be integrated with strategic-policy/politico-military actions.

⁹For example, the grand narrative and interlocking themes that characterise Da'esh's propaganda campaign epitomise this principle. For more, see H. J. Ingram, "A Brief History of Propaganda during Conflict", pp.31-33.

Modern warfare and in particular irregular conflict consists of two inter-connected competitions: the battle for *meaning* and the battle for *control*. Whilst the latter is gained by politico-military dominance, the former is where messaging campaigns play a crucial role in shaping perceptions of the conflict and its actors. Words and actions must be understood as two halves of the same coin. To have a coherent and effective strategy, requires close integration of these efforts. Ideally, this principle must permeate through strategic-policy and doctrinal guidance as well as organisational structures and processes. Indeed, if communications and actions are synchronised together effectively, then actions themselves very soon become messages: 'communication by action' (*propaganda by the deed*). When actions on the ground re-enforce messages, it increases the credibility of the message, the messenger and the actor by reducing the perceived say-do-gap. This is not only effective offensively but facilitates effective defensive messaging by denying the opposition counter-messaging opportunities based on highlighting say-do disparities.

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About ICCT

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