

CREST

Situational Threat And Response Signals (STARS): Public-facing Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communication Campaigns - Social Media Analysis

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INTRODUCTION

This briefing reports findings from an empirical study conducted as part of the wider STARS project, investigating the role of social media in disseminating public facing Counter-Terrorism strategic communications messages. The adoption of this focus reflects how there is a growing literature using social media data to track and trace the harms that arise in the aftermath of terror attacks. For example, in the form of hate crimes and escalated community tensions. There is less work, however, that has explored what happens outside of crisis situations and in terms of more positive preventative messaging, that is the principal focus of the STARS project.

To conduct a preliminary investigation of the latter issue, we used the Brandwatch tool to collect Twitter data for posts between May 19th 2021 and May 26th 2022 relating to five key counter-terrorism communication campaign hashtags: 1). #ACTEarly 2). #ProjectServator 3). #CommunitiesDefeatTerrorism 4). #ActionCountersTerrorism 5). #SeeItSayItSorted

The resulting data were analysed in two main ways:

1. temporally to examine increases and decreases in posting volumes over time and some of the causes and consequences associated with these patterns, especially relating to the resulting sentiments generated
2. in terms of who the principal authors are relating to each campaign, and the levels of reach and engagement they are achieving.



Several headline findings from this approach can be identified:

- All of the top social media authors engaging with the five hashtag based campaigns were police and official government accounts. The over-riding pattern was of counter-terrorism officials talking to each other and promoting each others posts.
- Sentiment analysis of the content of posts and responses to these suggest campaigns were triggering a lot of public fear and anxiety. A legitimate question to pose is whether the authorities should be in the business of promoting fear, albeit acknowledging that some public concern needs to be elicited if awareness is to be raised.
- That said, there were shifts over time in the levels of public fear and anxiety, suggesting that it is amenable to being influenced by appropriately configured messaging.

TIMELINE ANALYSIS

In this section of the briefing, we focus upon the posting volumes over time. *Figure 1* visualises the overall volume of data extracted from Brandwatch for all five hashtags combined.

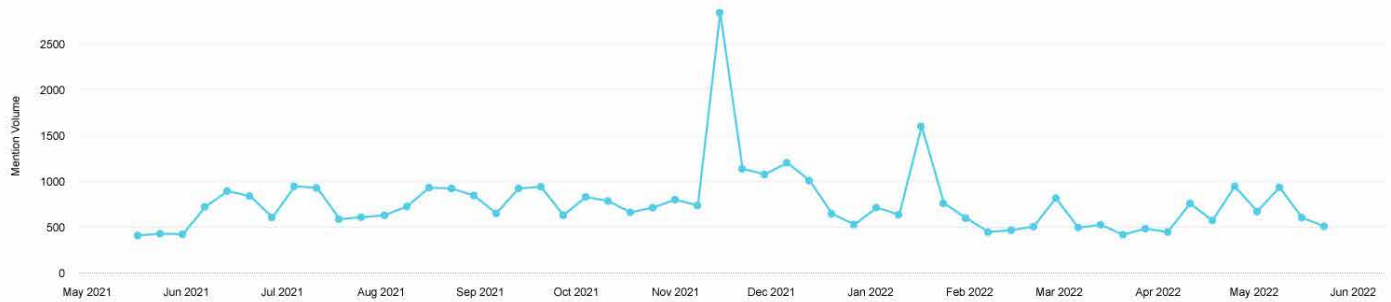


Figure 1: Overall Posting Volumes for Twitter Data

From this figure we can see that for most of the twelve month period the number of messages is fairly consistent. There are a couple of spikes that will be discussed in more detail. This patterns is however, for most of the time, consistent with what we might expect where the conversation is dominated by official accounts transmitting a steady stream of messages.

In *Figure 2*, these patterns over time are disaggregated for the five individual hashtags. This clarifies that the most discussed campaign is “Action Counters Terrorism”.

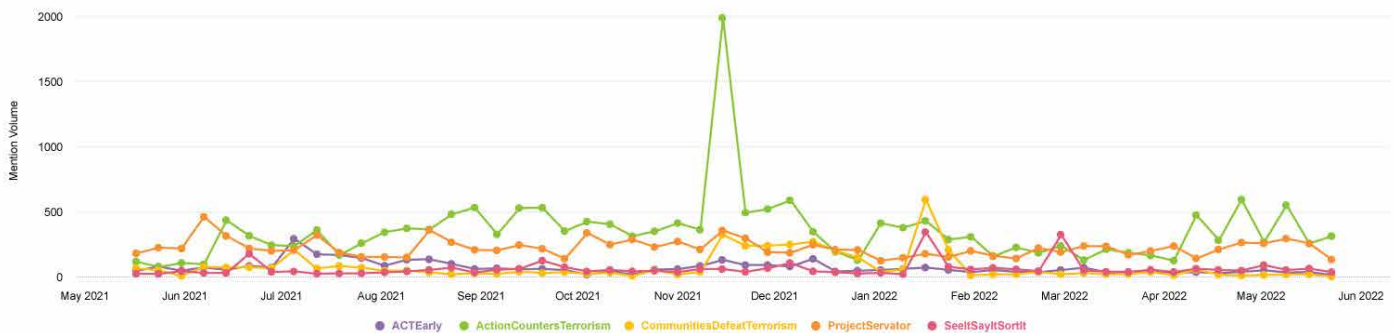


Figure 2: Overall Posting Volumes for Twitter Data across the five individual hashtags

Closer inspection of the content of the data enables us to account for and explain a number of the key ‘spikes’ in the data. These include:

- Jun 2021 – Project Servator was running.
- Jul 2021 – ACT Early was deployed for the Euros football championship.
- Nov 2021 – Action Counters Terrorism – there was a significant spike driven by events in Kenya, where they had also adopted this hashtag.
- Jan 2022 – Communities Defeat Terrorism – the up-tick for this hashtag at this point in time is associated with the Texas Synagogue stand-off.
- Jan 2022 - See It Say It Sorted - The government mooted a proposal to remove repetitive announcements, which increased public engagement with this hashtag.

SOCIAL MEDIA BRIEFING

PUBLIC-FACING COUNTER-TERRORISM STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGNS

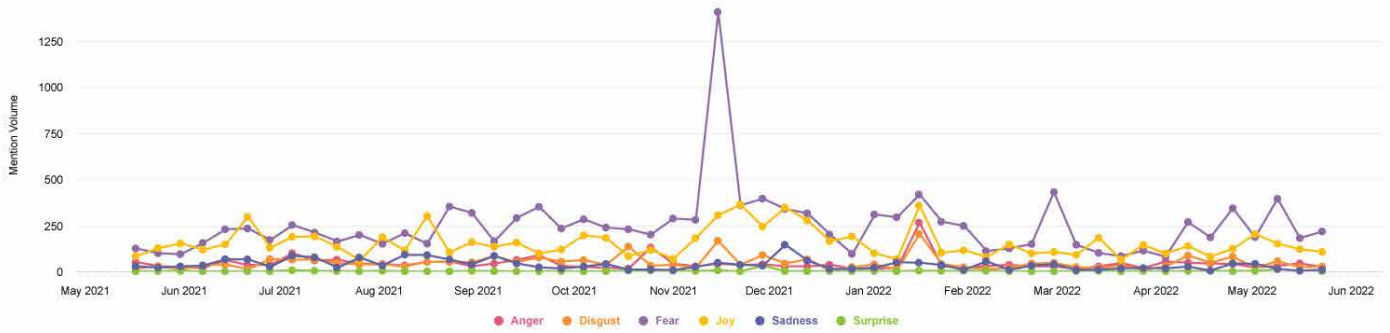


Figure 5: Brandwatch - online reactions to campaign messaging

From these data, it can be observed that ‘fear’ is the dominant emotion over the period. The spike in November 2021 was driven by the aforementioned counter terrorism situation in Kenya.

The following series of figures provide similar analyses, broken down by individual campaigns. This helps to clarify that the different campaigns are eliciting different emotional reactions, and are activating at different moments in time.

#ACTEARLY

Fear was the most dominant emotion over the period studied. It peaked in July 2021 associated with negatively emotive words, such as risk, and worrying.

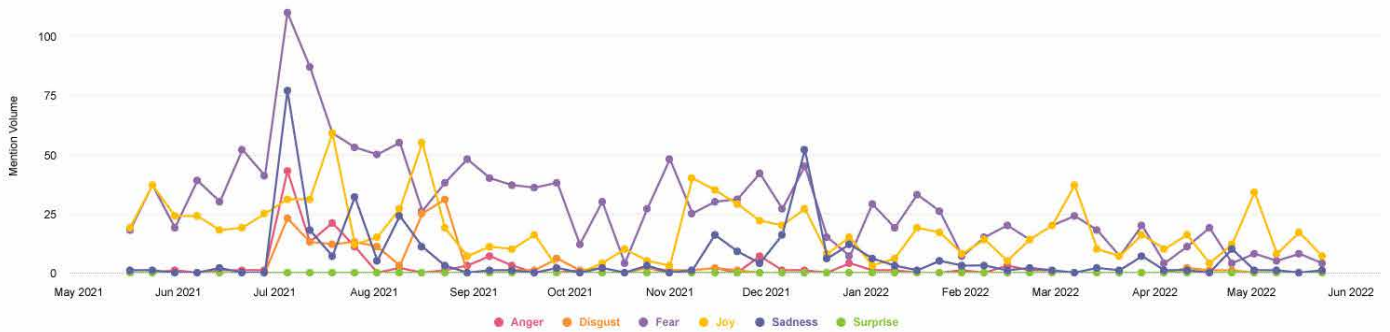


Figure 6: #ACTEARLY mention volumes

#COMMUNITIESDEFEATERRORISM

A persistently strong emotion under the ‘Communities Defeat Terrorism’ hashtag was fear, especially in November 2021, where the messaging was predominantly acting as a public warning. During December 2021 the messaging became more positive and reassuring.

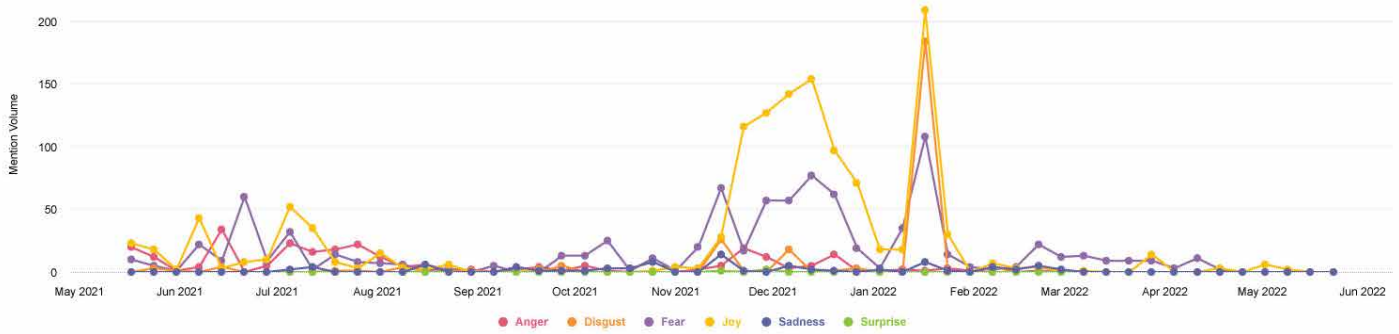


Figure 7: #CommunitiesDefeatTerrorism mention volumes

#ACTIONCOUNTERSTERRORISM

Because the sample is skewed toward the action counters terrorism hashtag this is broadly similar to the overall sample.

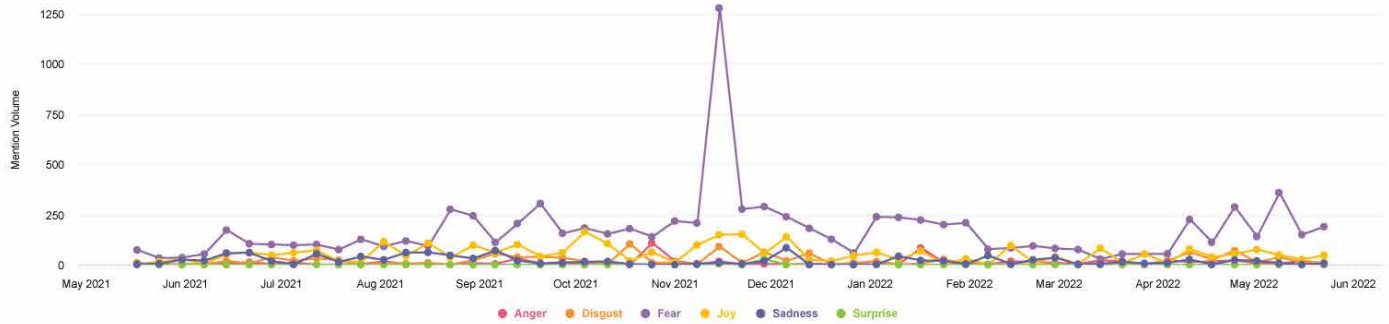


Figure 8: #ActionCountersTerrorism mention volumes

#PROJECTSERVATOR

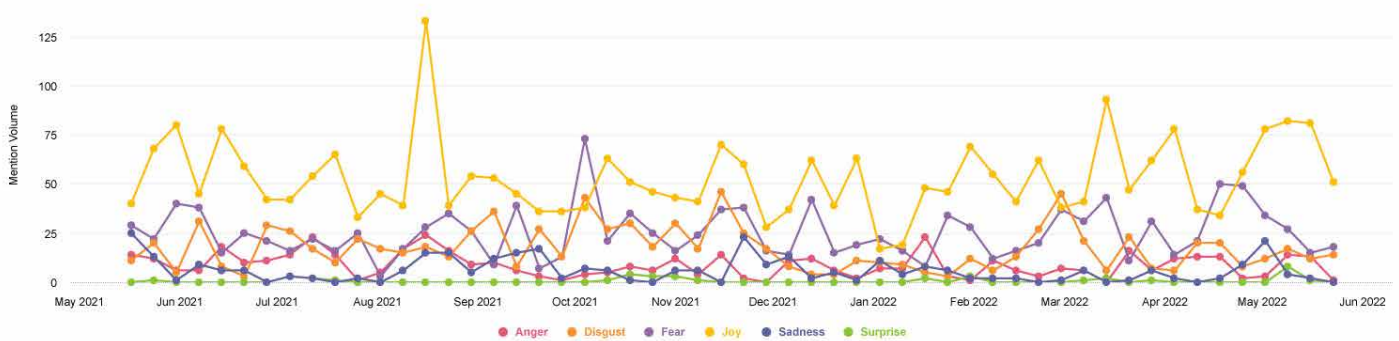


Figure 9: #ProjectServator mention volumes

The most common emotion over the time period was classified as ‘joy’ by Brandwatch. The highest peaks for joy were in August 2021 – positive tweets about the work being done by Project Servator, and March 2022 for similar reasons. In October 2021, ‘fear’ was briefly the dominant emotion. This appears to be associated with a change in the tone of messaging, from positive reassurance to warning the public.

#SEEITSAYITSORTED

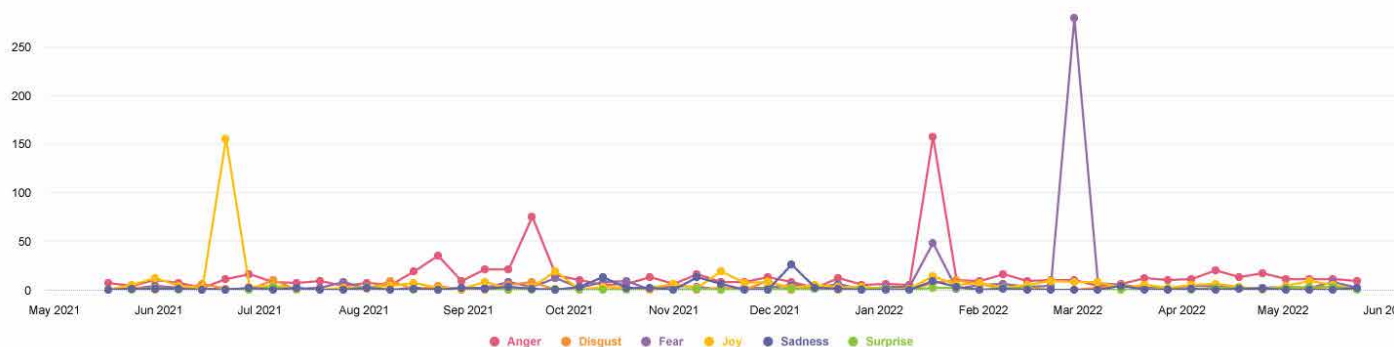


Figure 10: #SeeItSayItSorted mention volumes

The most common emotion associated with See It Say It Sorted was ‘Anger’. This particularly spiked around late September 2021 and Jan 2022. In September most posts were a play on the campaign to comment on Keir Starmer. In January most posts were in response to a government pledge to silence annoying repetitive announcements. The fear related spike in Feb 2022 was related to a comment made by Sadiq Khan where he stated London was well prepared for a nuclear attack. It is notable that this is one of the few hashtags where the narratives and emotional sentiments were not driven by professional accounts.

Account Name	Number of # Posts	Number of Followers
UkCountyLines	1874	3765
CTP_Kenya	1283	13532
Gideon_Kitheka	450	107494
MbroPrevent	418	378
ManderaBlogger	401	45104
Andrewwhitton2	327	2538
MPSWestminster	254	32480
MODPolice	244	10340
MetCC	207	31109
TerrorismPolice	204	69376

TOP AUTHORS

Having tracked the patterns of messaging activity and affective reactions to these over-time, we now turn to explore briefly who were the messengers responsible for producing this content. The Table below briefly profiles the ten Twitter accounts that sent the highest volume of posts relating to the five key hashtags. The left hand column provides the Twitter account name, with the next column listing the number of messages sent during the review period featuring one of the hashtags of interest. The third column in the table provides the follower numbers for that account, providing a rough and ready indicator of the potential reach of their posts.

The take-home insight from these figures is the strong presence of official accounts disseminating public-facing CT strategic communication campaign messages in relatively high volumes. However, there was relatively little evidence of these achieving strong community engagement, or organic ‘pick-up’. A longer list of accounts sending the hashtags was generated, but broadly speaking it replicated a similar pattern. There were a few ‘ordinary’ Twitter users using these hashtags, alongside a strong showing of official and semi-official accounts who were promoting and pushing them.

CONCLUSIONS

There are several caveats that need to be attached to this outline analysis. Notably, Twitter is only one social media platform, and has its own unique affordances and user communities, in terms of demographic, social and political profiles. Relatedly, the time period under review was one without any especially high-profile terror incidents in the UK. It does seem plausible to suggest that public attention to and engagement with counter-terrorism messaging, may follow a rather different pattern in the aftermath of an attack.

Such issues notwithstanding the overall picture that emerges is of a relatively ‘small world’ conversation on Twitter, with a series of police and partner agency related accounts, responsible for posting and reposting one another.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This Social Media Briefing comes from part of the *Situational Threat and Response Signals (STARS) project*. This project responds to the challenge of how to communicate effectively with the public about terrorism risks and threats in an increasingly complex and fragmented information environment. To read other outputs from this project, visit our website:

www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/situational-threat-and-response-signals-stars/

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