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WHAT'S NEW, WHAT WORKS? COUNTERING-TERRORISM WITH PUBLIC-FACING STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGNS

How can we innovate to communicate more effectively with the public about counter-terrorism? Charis Rice and Martin Innes respond to this challenge using the 'Situational Threat and Response Signals (STARS)' research project.

Public facing strategic communication campaigns are now a mainstay in countering terrorism. Messaging campaigns have been used to encourage public reporting of suspicious behaviour, to reassure citizens, and to try and deter hostile behaviours. However, a recurring concern is that messaging about terrorism might have unintended consequences, such as boosting fear rather than reassurance. Fundamentally, 'what works' in designing and delivering effective and impactful public communications remains unclear.

The 'Situational Threat and Response Signals (STARS)' research project responds to the challenge of how to communicate effectively with the public about terrorism in an increasingly complex and fragmented information environment. Following a multidisciplinary literature review, we used frame analysis of a sample of campaigns, practitioner interviews, public focus groups, and social media analysis to examine three UK campaigns – 'See it, Say it, Sorted', 'Action Counters Terrorism', and 'Security On Your Side'. Taking a view that context is likely to matter, we captured practitioner and public perspectives across different (urban and rural) parts of the UK: England, Wales, and Northern Ireland.



IF A CAMPAIGN IS THE ANSWER, WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

We identified two key tensions that frustrate the design and delivery of counter terrorism (CT) campaigns:

1. The 'fear trap': When CT campaigns try to 'outbid' other risks or even different types of terrorist threat, they can unintentionally create the negative emotional reactions being sought by terrorists. Equally, balancing levels of reassurance against enough fear to command public attention is challenging, particularly within those communities where terrorism or other threats are relatively 'normal'.
2. The 'fame trap': Comes from creating 'too much' awareness of terrorism in the general population, often driven by using commercial marketing logics to try to get attention and cut through in the crowded information environment. Moreover, the public are probably most receptive to CT messaging in the aftermath of 'signal events', when it is actually required less; and accessing the right audience segments while not diluting the core message involves seeking a 'Goldilocks moment' that is 'just right'.

"The problem is that a lot of the people that are developing these campaigns are also living in those nicely middle-class suburbs and don't have the lived experience, don't know how this is going to land. So a lot of working effort needs to go into actually thinking through the audiences that we're trying to speak to... their experiences... whether they are aware that they're even being affected by this" (Practitioner, Northern Ireland).

A USER-LED APPROACH: WHAT WOULD THIS LOOK LIKE?

Most practitioners were very focused on how to harness social media for campaign effectiveness. However, we found little day-to-day public engagement with campaign hashtags on Twitter. The overall picture was of police and partner agency related accounts, posting and reposting one another, but capturing little public attention.

Concurrently, in our focus groups and interviews across the UK, we captured insights on what a 'user-led' campaign would involve and problems with current public engagement approaches. Five key themes emerged.

PROBLEMS: Public trust is a critical problem for CT, and there is a tentative awareness among practitioners that tackling distrust requires a different set of objectives and measures to that of building trust (Rice *et al.*, 2021). A related problem concerns how resonant current campaigns are with lived experience.

PEOPLE: Speaking to both of these issues, practitioners discussed direct, face to face public engagement as critical to public trust building. This can be done via local police patrols and interactions with the public, and specifically Project Servator deployments, as well as outsourcing communication to "community messengers" (P15, England). Community messengers may be helpful both for widening dissemination, but also because citizens and community leaders are able to message and engage in boundary pushing ways, for example through humour and satire, where it would not be appropriate for governments to try and replicate.

PLACES: Making a message persuasive and impactful can be accomplished by innovating through the mediums and the delivery spaces, as much as message content. In addition to the social media arena, practitioners saw promise in cost-effective localised delivery measures via local authorities and councils, local business forums, or community organisations.

When discussing the right places and mediums for CT public facing campaigns in the focus groups, participants mentioned traditional methods such as television and radio adverts, schools based initiatives and face to face education, in addition to online (social) media avenues. Examples were given of health promotion communication campaigns in this respect and initiatives such as the green cross code.

PRODUCTS: Relatedly, product suggestions included physical assets such as messages on train tickets or posters inside public toilet doors (similar to the 'Ask Angela' notices) and 'token' marketing such as key rings. This reflects the approach of community 'nudges' and 'ritual models' that have proved successful in other contexts such as natural disaster preparation (Heath *et al.*, 2017).

POSSIBILITIES: Commercial techniques and new technologies present new possibilities for improving campaign pre-testing and evaluation (e.g., testing emotional responses through facial recognition software) rather than solely to the transmission of campaign messaging. The power of narrative and storytelling was considered by several practitioners to be an under-used technique in the CT space, underpinning to some extent the reasons why community messengers were considered effective.

"It [the Green Cross Code campaign] worked because they came around the school and they asked questions and the children got involved, and you had a little badge and things, but you know, I'm talking about 60 years ago, and I can still remember those" (Urban, Male, 66, White, Cardiff).

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT WORKS? ADAPTATION VS INNOVATION

These findings have implications for the view of innovation in counter-terrorism public-facing communication. Rather than innovation being viewed as a chase to keep up with the fast paced social media trajectory, it may be better considered as adapting messaging to particular situations, which may or may not require 'new' methods. Part of this adaptation may be translating issues into their local context through established community relationships and traditional mediums, using narrative techniques to engage audiences and explain messaging rationale.

To this end, the 'STARS' framework provides a structured approach that those constructing CT campaigns can work through to help focus their communications to deliver targeted impact.

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