

Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications: Back to the Future: Lessons from Past and Present

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Abstract. This paper explores the lessons that can be learned from past communication experiences to aid Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications (CTSC) campaigns targeting the current propaganda threat from so-called “Islamic State” (IS). It will do this by highlighting four lessons from the past from two different areas of communication practice – the history of propaganda and political communication – that are relevant for the current information war against IS. These are i) the need for multiple mediums of communication, ii) the say-do-gap, iii) defensive and offensive messaging, and, finally, iv) market research and targeting.

Keywords. Counter-Terrorism, Strategic Communications, Propaganda, Counter-Narratives.

1. Introduction

The current work on Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications (CTSC) suffers from two key weaknesses that stem from the perception that the present day propaganda threat from so-called “Islamic State” (IS) is entirely unique and unprecedented. The first is that there is nothing to learn from past communication experiences and the second that there is little to learn from other areas of communication outside of the CTSC field. The object of this paper is to challenge these assumptions and to act as a first attempt at breaking down these intellectual silos. It will do this by highlighting four lessons from the past from two different areas of communication practice – the history of propaganda and political communication – that are relevant for the current information war against IS. These are i) the need for multiple mediums of communication, ii) the say-do-gap, iii) defensive and offensive messaging, and, finally, iv) market research and targeting.

2. Re-Inventing the Wheel

The means of communication have been continually evolving across the ages, from cave paintings to text written on parchment, to more recent communication evolutions such as the printing press, radio and television. However, perhaps the greatest communication revolution has come with the development of the internet over the last few decades and

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the emergence of social media platforms. The peer-to-peer nature of social media has often been hailed as a game changer, placing individuals in charge of content and distribution and allowing them to no longer be reliant on media organisations or governments for the flow of information. The so-called democratisation of media has in the process limited the ability of governments and organisations to control the flow of information. This major shift in the media landscape often leads to a view that everything is new in the social media era, and that in this new paradigm there is little to learn from the history of communications. However, whilst the media landscape may have fundamentally changed, much can still be learned from the past. While the messages and means of delivery may be different, the broad concepts of what makes an effective message still apply.

The emergence and rise to prominence of IS over the last few years has brought to the fore the impact of terrorist propaganda, bringing with it a hitherto unseen level of sophistication and professionalism in its media operations: in particular, IS's use of social media, and its 'slick' production values in its online videos. However, this focus on what is new about IS's communications has only re-enforced the view that there is little to learn from the past to counter what is seen as such a 'new' threat. This perception, though, needs to be challenged. Firstly, IS propaganda is not as new and novel as often believed; it is rather that it has penetrated further into the minds of policy makers and the wider public consciousness than previously. In reality, many of the alleged 'innovations' of IS media such as glossy English language magazines have been produced by jihadist groups since the 1980's². Secondly, the main innovation in IS propaganda and the reason for the much wider awareness of it is the group's very successful exploitation of the internet and, in particular, social media messaging. But this needs to be seen in context: the adoption of the internet and social media is the use of a new 'tool' in propaganda, not an entirely new phenomenon. Hence, there are still many lessons we can learn from the past which are applicable in the internet age. Unless we take this onboard, we at best run the risk of wasting valuable time re-inventing the wheel, and at worst of pursuing policies which are counter-productive as we repeat the mistakes of the past.

To avoid re-inventing the wheel, we need to learn not just from the past but from the broadest possible spectrum of examples. However, there is a tendency for this knowledge to be kept separate in intellectual silos, whilst in reality CTSC is an area that would benefit greatly from a multi-disciplinary approach and cross-pollination of ideas. This means looking beyond the narrow field of counter-terrorism to learn lessons from a wide range of communication fields: from propaganda to commercial marketing and advertising, to political campaigns and communication, or public health and crime prevention, to name but a few. This paper will highlight some lessons learned from the fields of propaganda and political communication.

3. Learning the Lessons of Past Propaganda Campaigns

Looking to the past, the history of propaganda shows us that there is no 'silver bullet' for successful strategic communications. Instead, what we see from past propaganda is that effective campaigns are the result of a multitude of different factors across three levels

² Such as the Afghan Jihad Quarterly.

(Macro/Mezzo/Micro), being successfully implemented in coordination [1]. Two lessons from history are highlighted below that are particularly relevant to the current struggle against IS, mistakes that we are in danger of making again: first, examining the need for multiple means of communication and second, the say-do-gap.

3.1. Medium – the need for multiple means of communication

The importance of social media today, and especially how effectively they have been used by the likes of IS in their propaganda campaigns, as discussed above, often leads to a form of tunnel vision in policy makers who assume that online social media are the only mediums of communication that we should be focusing on. However, history has repeatedly demonstrated the importance of using multiple mediums of communications to enact effective communication campaigns. A striking example is that of the Protestant Reformation in Europe during the middle ages. The success of the Reformation is often explained by the emergence of the Gutenberg press, in which the ability to quickly replicate a message via printed texts is seen as being at the heart of the rapid spread of the Reformation message. However, while the printed word undoubtedly succeeded in spreading ideas far and wide across the European continent, it alone cannot account for the impact of the messages. For, at the time, the vast majority of the population were illiterate, and hence unable to understand the printed word. Instead, the means of communication through which the ideas of the Reformation reached the masses were speeches and sermons from Reformist preachers. It was this combination of two mediums of communication and how they interacted that proved so effective: printed word and oration. While the former spread the message across the continent, it was the latter that connected it to the people [2].

Fast forward to the present day and the same situation applies. An over-reliance on social media means that messages can only be directed at those who use social media, excluding parts of the population that do not do so, or those who do not have access to them, such as in IS-controlled areas where internet use is restricted [3]. Similarly, focusing on only one medium leads to a reliance on that network to spread the message to the intended audience. In short, other mediums such as radio or printed press may also be needed to reach a broader audience. Furthermore, relying on only one medium to spread a message prevents the re-enforcing effect of using multiple mediums of communication, whereby online messages are strengthened by the resonance with messages in other formats, in the same way that during the Reformation, printed texts in conjunction with oration had a force multiplier effect. Similarly, it has been noted that online propaganda rarely radicalises individuals by itself but rather tends to work in conjunction with friend and kin group dynamics [4]. As such, the lesson to learn is not to focus solely on social media, but to understand how this means of communication interacts with other mediums, and use this to leverage the effects of messaging.

3.2. Closing the Say-Do-Gap ...

One of the great ironies of the West's 'War on Terror' is that it has often been undermined by the West's own actions. Time and time again, the rhetoric of Western governments has been in contrast to their actions on the ground. This so-called say-do-gap – the differences between what we say and what we do – in the long-term only serves to undermine the credibility, and in the process, the effectiveness of the messaging. This

gap between words and actions presents a vulnerability that al Qaeda has often exploited in its propaganda campaigns. Bin Laden, for instance, liked to point out what he saw as the hypocrisy of the USA branding him a terrorist, whilst highlighting American actions that have killed innocent men, women and children, such as the dropping of atomic weapons on Japan in World War Two [5]. A lesson from history, which the West continuously fails to learn, is to consider the unintended 2nd and 3rd order effects of misguided strategic communications. History is littered with examples of the ‘blow back’ of unwise messages used for short-term gain but which, in the long-term, as our actions fail to match our words, erode our credibility. Most notoriously, British atrocity propaganda in World War One had striking short-term effects, notably helping to encourage USA participation in the War, but as the exaggerations of the propaganda became known after the war had ended, Anglo-American relations were undermined and it resulted in the reporting of Nazi atrocities being slow to resonate [6].

To many, the Iraq war has come to epitomise the West’s hypocrisy and forever undermine the trustworthiness of our actions. The say-do-gap appears here in the concerted campaign led by the USA and the UK to convince the world that Iraq not only possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMD) but also presented an imminent threat. This was backed up by the UK’s now infamous ‘dodgy dossier’ which George Bush cited to claim that a chemical or biological attack could be launched within 45 minutes of the order given [7]. When no trace of WMD was found, the campaign became seen as cynical manipulation for ulterior motives.

Similarly, the USA’s argument that the war was fought to bring democracy to the Middle East, lacked credibility when seen alongside the authoritarian regimes the USA props up in the region for its own expediency. Similarly, the USA’s promotion of democracy as the solution and its proselytising of Western values of Human Rights and the Rule of Law [8] were called into question by the emergence of the human rights abuses carried out at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo bay, and the USA’s extensive practice of extraordinary rendition [9]. Whatever short-term gain (if any) was made using information extracted under torture needs to be seen alongside the damage done by the exposure of the West’s double standards.

Subsequently, in the Syrian conflict we have again seen history repeating itself, most notably with Obama’s declaration that the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime was a ‘red line’, and that crossing it would lead to military action [10] Sure enough, when chemical weapons were used and the anticipated Western military action never materialised, the perceived say-do-gap was reinforced, thereby forever undermining the Syrian opposition’s trust in the West – the very opposition that we are trying to bolster in our struggle against IS.

The collective ramification of the West’s say-do-gap is keenly exposed in the current situation in Iraqi Kurdistan. Whilst the Kurds realise that they are the West’s front line against ISIS, many harbour doubts over whether to do the West’s bidding, questioning how far the West can be trusted. As they point out, they saw what happened after the first Gulf War when the West encouraged the Kurds and Shia Arabs to rise up against Saddam, only for the promised support not to materialise and for the West to sit back and do nothing as Saddam ruthlessly put down the uprisings [11]. Unfortunately, this is only one of many examples they can cite.

The lesson is clear: to maintain credibility - a necessity to be effective - messaging needs to correspond to the reality on the ground. Insincere messaging used for expediency is like the boy who cried wolf, with past actions of the West now undermining today's messaging.

4. Lessons from Political Campaigns and Communication

Another one of the many intellectual silos that may prove a fertile ground for new insights for CTSC are the techniques of political campaigns and communication. The following section examines the campaigning techniques of defensive and offensive messaging, targeting messages and market research.

4.1. Defensive and Offensive messaging

Consider counter-narratives or counter-messages, which are all the rage in policy circles as the latest panacea to IS's slick social media campaigns: although countering IS's messages may seem intuitive and a no-brainer, it is implicitly based on a number of assumptions. Not least, should we actually counter IS's messages?

If we pause for a moment and consider this from the perspective of political campaigning, the dilemma becomes clearer. When a political party or candidate is faced with a damaging message disseminated by the opposition, the natural response may be to immediately counter it. However, experience shows that this may not be the most effective approach. If you reply to your opposition's message, on the one hand, you are merely giving 'oxygen' to the story and prolonging its news cycle, and on the other hand, you are merely repeating and hence re-enforcing the message. As such, you are talking about what the opposition wants to talk about and are allowing them to set the narrative of the campaign.

A good example of this is the UK's 1979 general election and the launch of the Conservative Party's infamous "Labour isn't working" poster [12]. The slogan undermined the Labour Party's traditional aim for full employment by highlighting the escalating rise in unemployment [13]. The Labour Party's ensuing attack against the poster "served only to guarantee the poster massive front-page coverage – and helped propel Margaret Thatcher to power" [14]. Attacking it simply re-enforced the narrative while at the same time distracting the Labour Party from talking about the issues they had wanted to fight their campaign on. The Conservatives had successfully taken control of the narrative and set the terms of the debate. As political strategist Dr. Ron Faucheux argues, "[d]efense may win football games but staying on the offense wins wars and political campaigns. That's why campaigns attack the other side; when you're on the attack, you're on the offense and your opponent is on the defense." [15]

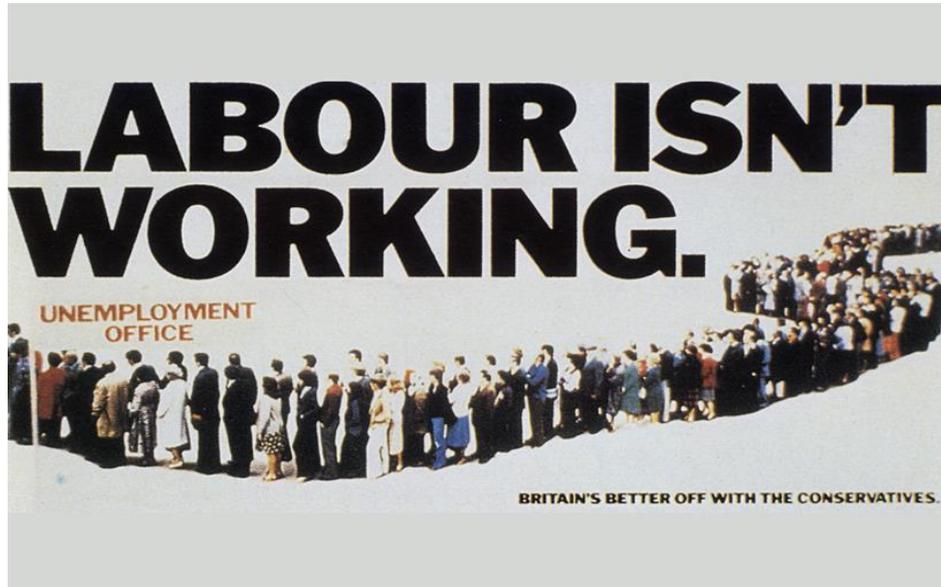


Figure 1. Conservative Party poster "Labour isn't Working" by Saatchi and Saatchi, 1979

By rushing to counter IS's messaging we risk falling into the same trap by fighting the communications war on their terms, thus unconsciously playing into their hands and re-enforcing their narrative. Hence, the lesson from political communications is to avoid ceding control of the narrative to the opposition and instead to force the opposition on to the back foot, compelling them to rebut your messaging, and in the process taking control of the narrative. Whilst defensive messages have their place, communication campaigns are not won by being on the defensive - this requires going on the offensive.

4.2. Targeting Messages

At the heart of modern political communication is targeting different messages at different parts of the target audience. Targeting is crucial for two reasons. First, simply in terms of resource management, targeting allows you to focus your finite resources where they will be most effective. Second, by ensuring that individuals are targeted with the message that resonates most with them, voters are more effectively persuaded [16]. Following on from this, it allows different parts of the audience to be targeted with different messages to influence them to follow different actions, dependent on the overall strategy. For example, an election campaign will want to be able to target their own supporters to encourage them to vote (increase relative turnout); target the main opposition to dissuade them from voting (to stay at home on election day); and target third party supporters to persuade them to vote tactically (to lend them their vote). This requires a) identifying the different target groups and b) identifying the most effective messages for those target groups. To be able to do this, political campaigns expend vast resources in polling and other means of research to be able to identify their target audiences and the best corresponding message. Without this research, any attempts at messaging – based on intuition alone – are, at best, a shot in the dark.

In general, political messages can be targeted either demographically or geographically [17]. In the former, voters are identified in terms such as age, gender, profession or education and then targeted with messages designed to resonate most with that demographic. For example, young people may be targeted with messages about student finance and old people with those about pensions. In the latter, voters are grouped by location and targeted with messages connected to where they live. This could be by region or city, or in sophisticated campaigns, targeting can go down to the neighbourhood or street level.

However, over the last decade, political campaigning has been increasingly moving in the new direction of micro-targeting, taking it to a whole new level of precision by data-mining information available on voters. As Ken Strasma explains, “Micro-targeting works by taking whatever individual-level information is available (e.g., IDs, contributor information, vote history) and combining it with demographic, geographic and marketing data about those individuals to build statistical models that predict the attitudes and behaviors of voters for whom that individual-level information is not known” [18]. This information can then be used to target individuals with tailored adverts via the internet and social media, so that two individuals living in the same house may get different messages targeted at them when they use the internet [19].

There is huge scope for CTSC campaigns to learn from the targeting techniques of campaigning to increase their effectiveness. Instead of producing one or two general ‘catch-all’ counter-narratives aimed at a whole community, targeted messaging can be developed that is much more context-specific and addresses the radicalising levers of the individual. In particular, the high-tech world of micro-messaging offers the most prospects of enabling tailored messages delivered to individuals. Further, different messaging can be developed to target individuals at different stages in the radicalisation process, where different messages will be more effective or even counter-effective at different stages [20].

4.3. All Politics is Local: All Jihad is Local

In politics there is an often repeated refrain that ‘all politics is local’. This translates in political campaigning to mean that local issues are often most important to voters, even in national elections. Local issues that affect people’s daily life resonate most strongly. As such, political campaigns often focus on the so-called quality of life issues that affect you in your neighbourhood, such as the resources at your local hospital, lack of teachers at your local school or local traffic problems [21]. This creates a mutually re-enforcing duality of messaging, with a national, often ideologically driven agenda in tandem with local, pragmatic concerns. This is a strategy that has also been successfully implemented by IS, whose Islamist ideology messaging goes hand in hand with local quality of life messaging, such as in their Muja Tweets series, showing, for instance, IS fighters enforcing market traders to use fair weights and measures in the local market. In terms of counter-messaging, it raises the question of whether we should look further than countering the ideology of IS and address the practical issues faced by those susceptible to radicalisation.

The key, however, to fighting national campaigns locally – with local messages – goes back to two interrelated parts of the messaging process: the ability to research and

identify both the most appropriate local issue to focus on and its corresponding message and also the ability to target these messages. In elaborate campaigns, this process of identifying and targeting messages is carried out down to the level of streets and neighbourhoods, with different messages being identified and delivered to each individual street in a given town. These messages are invariably not national campaign themes but specific quality of life issues affecting that street, such as pot-holes, faulty street lights, uncollected rubbish or street crime, etc. This targeted messaging at the local level has a powerful effect through leveraging rational choice levers attached to the target audiences' daily life. In terms of counter-messaging, the lesson is to develop effective targeted-messaging, rather than merely focusing on broad, general themes.

4.4. Market Research: Polling and Focus groups

The success of targeting depends on two things: being able to identify the voters in order to target them and being able to develop an effective message to target them with, both of which depend on extensive research. It is the latter that CTSC stands to learn the most from, for any communication is only as good as the message disseminated. In the political world, extensive progress has been made to adapt and develop market research tools, such as polling and focus groups, to help develop effective messaging. As stated by Newman and Perloff, "[t]he importance of doing research rests with the notion that not all products can be sold to all consumers. Companies use marketing research to determine what to stress to different consumer segments. Politicians are no different" [22].

Polling and focus groups can contribute to the success of messaging in two key ways: understanding the context and message testing. In elections, it is fundamental to identify and understand what the issues are that matter to the voters. Many campaigns can make the mistake of assuming what matters to the public and focus on issues that, in reality, are of little concern and therefore do not resonate with voters [23]. Once the key issues that do resonate with voters have been identified, the messages which are crafted to address them can be tested to find the most effective and, where necessary, can subsequently be modified in the light of the findings. These methods are directly applicable to CTSC. For instance, in developing counter-narratives, we should not assume that we know which issues are pertinent to those at risk of radicalisation. Hence, the market research techniques from political campaigning could be applied to both identifying the issues and testing the message.

There is, however, another area in which the market research techniques of political campaigning may be of even more use - that of evaluation. In CT, and CVE more generally, evaluation has increasingly become recognized as an important area that deserves more attention [24]. Unless we can properly evaluate our CT and CVE policies, we cannot determine whether they are effective, nor establish the lessons learned. Modern political campaigning exploits continuous market research throughout the campaign, and extensive statistical analyses to establish whether the messages are working [25]. It is just this sophisticated and scientific analysis that is needed to evaluate CTSC, in order to be able to deliver a clear set of measurable metrics, which will allow for the proper evaluation of CTSC campaigns. It is important to clearly establish which counter-messages are working and why in order to assess and improve the CTSC campaign's design and thereby its effectiveness.

5. Conclusion

Confronting the propaganda of IS is no doubt one of today's top security challenges. However, in confronting this challenge we should not be blinded by the perceived uniqueness of IS propaganda and prevented from seeking to learn lessons from elsewhere. There is much that can be learned and borrowed from the past and the failure to do this risks, at best, wasting time re-inventing the wheel and, at worst, repeating mistakes. There are many more lessons that can be learned from the history of propaganda and political campaigns as well as many other areas of communication from which we can learn.

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