



Strategic Communication & Countering Violent Extremism

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Introduction

On the 12th of January 2017, the Secretariat of the Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Netherlands organized a meeting on Strategic Communication and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). The meeting was part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs “Home Coming Days” for Regional Security Coordinators, and aimed to bridge connections among Dutch military and civilian actors that use strategic communication, in various forms and fields, to counter violent extremism.

What is Strategic Communication, and how is it used to counter violent extremism?

In this plenary session, presentations by Dr. Haroro J. Ingram (Coral Bell School, Australian National University and the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism in The Hague), Lt. Col. Johan Koers and Mr. Mourad Saidi (Ministry of Social Affairs & Employment) presented on the opportunities and challenges of using strategic communication for countering violent extremism in different contexts of engagement.

The contribution of Dr. Ingram built upon recent ICCT publications¹, describing what is needed in order to develop effective counter-terrorism strategic communications. Over the past years, extremist propaganda has proven highly effective. Although modern technology helps disseminating messages, it is important not to blame technology for this success. Extremists’ messages spread because they are tailored to resonate with the audience, and they are boosted by online- as well as offline social networks of likeminded collectives. Effective extremist narratives encourage “tunnel vision” among target audiences, spurring isolation from alternative ideas. Working to dismantle or discredit these narratives can be an effective counter, and this is where strategic communications enter the fold.

Not only the effectiveness of extremist propaganda, but also the ineffectiveness of counter-messaging strategies is to blame for the spread of terrorists’ message. Three interrelated key principles are particularly important in order to increase the success of strategic communication campaigns. First, in order to engage a wide audience, the messaging should be diverse in its means and media. Diversification of messaging will enhance the degree of audience penetration of messaging and encourage the repetition of the message. However, while diversity of messaging is key, both consistency and truthfulness of the message in all aspects of the campaign

¹ Haroro J. Ingram and Alastair Reed, Lessons from History for Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications, available via <https://icct.nl/publication/lessons-from-history-for-counter-terrorism-strategic-communications/> and Haroro J. Ingram, A Brief History of Propaganda During Conflict, available via <https://icct.nl/publication/a-brief-history-of-propaganda-during-conflict-a-lesson-for-counter-terrorism-strategic-communications/>.

is pivotal. Without consistency and credibility among messages, target audiences may be alienated, benefiting adversarial messaging. Secondly, all messaging

should ideally fall under the umbrella of an overarching, grand narrative. In absence of such a narrative, messages may appear to be ad hoc, thereby losing strength. Third, messaging should contain simultaneous rational and identity-choice, or emotional, appeals to target audiences. In doing so, strategic messaging achieves a double effect: boosting reception among a broader audience and encouraging rational and emotional choice processes among audiences to converge around a synchronized message. These key principles will lead to a maximization of the effects of the strategic communication effort, while the effects of the rival's messages are nullified.

The second contribution by Lt. Col. Johan Koers highlighted the challenges of working with different, sometimes diverging narratives of military and civilian actors. For example, military messaging tends to emphasize the defeat and undermining of the Islamic State in combat, while civilian messaging promotes the idea that the Islamic State will eventually collapse under its own failures. The coordination of communication efforts is complicated by these differences, which also leads to an unequal balance in sharing stories of success between civilian and military actors. Oftentimes, it is easier to communicate military success stories, which are attractive campaigning materials, than positive achievements in the civilian realm, as these tend to be less tangible or dramatic. According to Lt. Col. Koers, notwithstanding the importance of civil-military integration of communications, it might be worthwhile to increasingly focus first on the coherence of the coalition opposing the Islamic State. Especially for countries that, given their size, are likely to always work in coalitions, international coherence should precede asserting a national strategy within the coalition.

Mr. Mourad Saidi shared insights from the Ministry of Social Affairs' efforts in taking preventive measures against violent extremism, including the mobilization of counter-narratives from society. This is not an easy task, since the number of counter-narratives that are shared remains relatively low, and current extremist recruitment is based on moral and emotional appeal, which is hard to counter with rational arguments. Moreover, this appeal is mainly broadcasted via the media, bypassing existing institutions, and specifically focused at young people who are particularly susceptible to messages that appeal to one's social identity. The creation of a common enemy ("the West") is also central in this process.

Increasing young people's resilience to extremist propaganda often includes encouraging critical thinking, focusing on social cohesion, and the deployment of inclusive messaging.

Meanwhile, delegitimizing extremist narratives is best pursued by supporting the counter-narratives of civil-society organizations that enjoy greater legitimacy, strengthening social media strategies and breaking through filter bubbles and inner circles. Mr. Saidi shared several key learning points. Working more closely with civil-society organizations that are perceived as more credible actors in specific (local) contexts can ameliorate success of strategic communication efforts in certain circumstances. Identifying these actors and developing communication strategies that build on their expertise and network, both at home and abroad, offers opportunities for improvement that should be explored.



As repeated often over the course of the day, consistency is pivotal. Inconsistent communication diminishes the credible voice that the government can and should project. The polarized atmosphere around discussions of counter-extremism, the amount of false messaging, the difficulties in measuring the effects of preventive measures and the effect of high-impact events on social tensions, are all factors that challenge the efficacy of counter-extremism messaging campaigns.

Discussion

The discussion of the presentations highlighted two salient points. First, strategic communication must be part of a holistic, whole-of-government approach centered upon inclusive social policy. Strategic communication and messaging alone will not help to tackle the underlying drivers of extremism, both at home and abroad. Second, the real and perceived inconsistencies of Western foreign policies feeds, in particular the exploitation of the “say-do gap” (the difference between what the West says it does, and what it actually does), is a key message within extremist propaganda.

Break-out sessions

In three break-out sessions participants discussed lessons from previous strategic communication campaigns, the coordination of civilian and military strategic communication, and information sharing between domestic and international messaging campaigns.

The first discussion was moderated by Ms. Janet Anderson of RNW Media, and discussed lessons learned from prior communication approaches or campaigns. In terms of learning from communication approaches, the importance of sharing and explaining factual information was underlined, as well as being creative in deciding about the way in which information is channeled. Overall, employing an emphatic and self-questioning attitude was mentioned by all participants, as was the need to build in learning processes to better capture and learn from failures and successes. Working with credible, locally embedded organizations is central to the success in messaging campaigns abroad. Moreover, governments should not shy away from working with partners in the realm of new media and entertainment. Finally, remaining challenges in strategic communication campaigns include: the credibility of sources; how to address the double standard and the “say-do gap”; measuring the impact of strategies; the difficulty of predicting how a message will be received; and the centrality of religion: how and by whom can (or should) this element be addressed in strategic communication efforts?

The importance of coordinating strategic communication between civilian and military actors was the theme of the second breakout session, moderated by Kees-Jan Steenhoek. A lack of coordination often results in less effective and less credible counter-messaging. Proper



coordination, on the other hand, diminishes the risks of military and civilian actors communicating competing narratives, inappropriate framing of messages in relation to the target group, and a flawed timing of messaging. Consistency in messaging is thus pivotal. However, the development of a unified strategy for cooperation remains a challenge. This is in part due to the different communication strategies of the actors involved.. Additionally, civilian-military cooperation could benefit from an improved information structure through which the military data that is required to design effective counter-narratives, would become more readily accessible for all actors involved.

In order to enhance learning from prior counter-terrorism efforts, including the development of counter-narratives, participants pointed out the importance of establishing a network to facilitate easy access to these lessons and similar strategic communication practices. Linked to this, the need for developing (and sharing) tools to measure effectiveness was underlined. The third breakout group discussed the question of how domestic and international messaging campaigns can inform one another, and was led by Mr. Ivo Veenkamp from Hedayah. Various narratives used in strategic communication efforts direct towards IS already exist. The challenge is collecting and disseminating these narratives in such a way that frontline workers can use them effectively. Secondly, supporting credible (local) voices in cooperation with CVE experts in developing strategic social media campaigns that most effectively reach local audiences should be a top priority.

The topic of consistency of messaging, and the alignment of messages and actions, was discussed extensively. Double standards and inconsistent messaging breed and feed extremism, thereby making strategic communication counterproductive, and should thus be avoided. The discussion underlined how groups that are vulnerable to violent extremism can benefit from the aforementioned synchronized or unified communication between military and stabilizing actors. Transparency in communication of means and objectives should be a priority for all actors when targeting these groups.

In order to make strategic communication effective, messaging must be tweaked to the specifics of target audiences at all times. The discussion made clear that even though all experts are aware of this, it remains a challenge to put this principle in practice. As one participant put it: we are dealing with the “us versus them”-narrative on a conceptual level, but what applies to a neighborhood in Amsterdam probably does not apply to a community in Iraq or Syria. In order to improve the resonance of messaging, a proper and thorough understanding of local sentiments is pivotal.



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