

CREST

IDEOLOGICAL TRANSMISSION III

POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

This is the third and final research review in the CREST series on ideological transmission (the first was on the family, and the second on peers, education and prisons). It focuses on the process by which religious and political groups – from small cells and organisations to large movements, networks and milieus – pass on ideas, beliefs and values. Academic research on how, where and why these are transmitted, and by whom, is considered.

Ideological transmission is interpreted as the passing on of ideology from one person to another, or from a group to its internal and external audiences. We treat ideology as a broad concept, encompassing both political and religious ideas, and including beliefs, values, and their related practices.

Two main persuasive orientations were considered in this review: (i) external awareness-raising by groups, and (ii) their internal attempts to influence members and supporters. Three analytical concepts provided the focus: propaganda, framing and learning.

1. How do ideological groups make potential supporters and other outsiders aware of their views (awareness-raising/persuasion/propaganda)?
2. How is ideological material (beliefs, events, issues etc) framed by groups as they seek to raise awareness, gain recruits and energise followers?
3. How do members and other supporters acquire ideological knowledge within groups (learning/indoctrination)?



These questions are interconnected by the concept of ‘persuasion’, more specifically the active attempts used by external agents to persuade individuals.

The review draws on a range of evidence from multiple disciplines and contexts. Extremist groups – violent and non-violent – provide the principal examples, including a case study on the jihadist group, al-Muhajiroun.

However, it is clear that an understanding of how such groups communicate internally and externally needs to be set in the broader context of research on why organisations in general transmit ideas, beliefs and values (e.g. for group survival, recruitment, solidarity or coercion), how they go about doing so (formally or informally, top-down or peer-to-peer), what role ideological transmission plays in their goals, and how effective it is. In the case of extremist groups, the relationship between ideological transmission and radicalisation, recruitment, mobilisation and the move to violence are also important.

1 PROPAGANDA AND THE EXTERNAL TRANSMISSION OF IDEOLOGY

- 1.1 One recent definition describes propaganda as ‘*the deliberate attempt to persuade people to think and behave in a desired way*’.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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- 1.2 There is a long history of the study of propaganda, mainly focused on the use of propaganda by states, often in times of war.
- 1.3 Although state propaganda is often presented as highly effective, theoretical and empirical research suggests that even in cases where media systems are tightly controlled the effectiveness of propaganda is limited.
- 1.4 The most effective propaganda trades on pre-existing biases within populations.
- 1.5 In studies of propaganda assumptions were often made that message receivers had little agency and were helpless in the face of the propaganda with which they are assailed (as in the ‘hypodermic needle’ model of propaganda).
- 1.6 The ‘elaboration likelihood’ model gave more weight to the agency of audiences. When message recipients are motivated to engage with information, and have the resources to do so, they are more likely to pay attention and think deeply. Where attitude change occurs under these conditions, it is thought to be more enduring and more predictive of future behaviour as information is internalised. When motivation or ability to engage with information are low, recipients will expend less effort on evaluating appeals and are more likely to arrive at a response based on cues given to them.
- 1.7 From the 1990s, theorists shifted their attention from ‘propaganda’ to ‘promotional culture’, ‘strategic communication’ and ‘discourse’, though the rise of the Internet as a new platform for ideological transmission has recently led to an interest in ‘computational propaganda’.
- 1.8 Computational propaganda, which combines social media, big data, and automation to manipulate public opinion, has become an emerging strategy in the use of information technology for social control.
- 1.9 Analysis of the Web also shows that users are able to create their own online environments in which opposing views are excluded. In such ‘echo chambers’ and ‘filter bubbles’, political positions are not only allowed to go unchallenged, but are likely to polarise as activists compete to demonstrate ideological purity.
- 1.10 Propaganda has been closely linked to terrorism, with several models of terrorism viewing violence as a form of political communication, as ‘propaganda of the deed’.
- 1.11 Among other objectives, terrorist violence is designed to raise awareness of a group and its aims, as well as demonstrate that resistance is possible. Terrorist violence also aims to provoke a backlash by the state against sympathetic populations.
- 1.12 The impact of the Internet on propaganda and extremism has largely been considered through the frame of radicalisation, with little clear evidence that the presence of violent extremist narratives online has led to a growth in violent extremism.
- 1.13 The Internet has come to play a role in transmitting violent ideology in the same way that it does in transmitting other types of content. Social media, like other communications media, has been exploited.
- 1.14 Research has highlighted the role of the Web in providing violent extremist groups with access to larger and more dispersed audiences, as well as in accelerating the circulation of narratives, and providing low-risk forms of participation, e.g. sharing propaganda.
- 1.15 The increasing focus on the role of the Internet in facilitating violent extremism has led Government and other authorities to restrict access to violent extremist material, by taking down websites, removing content or uploading counter-narratives. This has increased reliance on harder to access tools (e.g. on the dark web) which may reduce audiences for violent extremist material.

2 THE FRAMING OF IDEAS, BELIEFS AND VALUES

- 2.1 A further tool for studying communication by political and religious groups is framing theory, developed in the context of research on social movements.
- 2.2 Frames are understood as existing mental schemas that provide a worldview for their adherents.
- 2.3 In framing theory, audiences were granted a role in interpreting and reacting to social movement frames, with movements bending their frames to fit new circumstances and audiences.

- 2.4** Framing theory is based on the idea that a shared culture and/or ideological position which resonates with audiences is needed to support collective action. This may enable the mobilisation of new recruits into the group, but may also help sustain the commitment of existing members.
- 2.5** A frame is understood to consist of three tasks: a diagnosis, a prognosis, and a motivational frame.
- 2.6** Diagnostic tasks identify problems, often focusing on victim narratives and injustice frames. They may also attribute blame and name those responsible for injustices. Prognostic framing proposes a solution to the diagnosed problem, including criticising the solutions proposed by others. Motivational tasks aim to move people from belief to action. Motivational vocabularies focus on severity, urgency, efficacy and propriety.
- 2.7** The resonance of a frame with an audience – a combination of its credibility and salience – relies on the consistency of the frame, the presence of readily accessible empirical evidence, and the credibility of those purveying the frame.
- 2.8** Theorists have suggested that, in competitive situations, frames that are repeated more often would be more credible, as would stronger frames, such as those that come from more credible sources, do not contradict prior knowledge, and that resonate with established values.
- 2.9** Framing theory has been used to bridge the divide between those studying violent mobilisations as consequences of rational and purposeful decision making by elites, and those taking a perspective that includes identity, emotions, history and symbols.
- 2.10** While propaganda has been widely acknowledged as limited and bound by culture and norms, framing theory has been able to take into consideration wider social and political contexts and their impact on mobilisation.

3 LEARNING AND THE INTERNAL TRANSMISSION OF IDEOLOGY

- 3.1** In addition to their attention to external communications, political and religious groups look inwards, to pass on ideas and traditions from one generation to the next, to stimulate belief, trust and acceptance of new policies and technological changes, to retain members, and build community and commitment.
- 3.2** In addition to *social learning theory*, in which emphasis was placed on the acquisition of skills through the observation of others, learning theory has developed to include *transformative learning*, a dimension of adult learning that enables us to reassess and transform our underlying frame of reference, *experiential learning*, where knowledge is created through the transformation of experience, and *situated learning*, which stresses the importance of cultural context and communities of practice for learning as social participation.
- 3.3** The aspirational concept of a ‘learning organisation’ began to be used in the 1990s. A learning organisation is one that ‘facilitates the learning of all its members, and continuously transforms itself’.
- 3.4** An important corrective came from scholars who stressed the ‘dialectic of control’ in organisations, and the interplay of power, institutional ideology and tacit coercion in the approaches used by managers/leaders in relation to employees/recruits.
- 3.5** Another important learning concept was the ‘community of practice’, based on the idea of apprenticeship as a means of gaining ‘legitimate peripheral access’ to a community and its knowledge and skills. Such communities exist everywhere, and each person belongs to multiple communities at any one time. In such contexts, learning is embedded in everyday social practices.
- 3.6** Those involved in groups are at different stages in an organisational learning process. They are being trained as new recruits or established members to fulfil certain roles; they are simultaneously being integrated into their organisation’s collective memory and becoming its repository.
- 3.7** Some adult learners will be adding to the embodied and in some cases doctrinal knowledge they acquired in childhood; they may be becoming more steadfast in their practice, may be reverting

after a time away, or converting to a new political or religious identity.

- 3.8 Other learners will be newcomers who need to build from scratch. They may have done some independent questing and learning before contacting or joining a group, but will want to be enculturated swiftly rather than remaining an outsider or novice for long. Learning the basics and the lingo will be important for a sense of belonging as well as doctrinal alignment.
- 3.9 There are several purposes to adult learning in political and religious groups: transmitting an ideology or worldview for the greater good of the group and wider society, now and in the future; keeping the traditions of the group going from one generation to the next through a ‘chain of memory’; training individuals to transmit these traditions, to perform the group’s beliefs and rituals, and to be a workforce for everyday tasks; ensuring the organisation’s adaptability and openness to innovation; and enabling the group to engage successfully in ideological and in some cases physical debates and contests.
- 3.10 In tightly-knit and/or hierarchical organisations, leaders are able to discipline members and control the discourses and practices related to learning, whereas in more fluid networks and less hierarchical movements greater onus is placed on individuals to sustain their own involvement and learning. Wider political and religious milieus will be looser still, with participants entirely in charge of their own learning, with guidance being *ad hoc* and resources dispersed.
- 3.11 The nature of the learning offered and a learner’s capacity to integrate and use it depend on the length and stage of their involvement and on factors such as trust, range of roles and responsibilities, and social mobility within the organisation.
- 3.12 Research has shown that neither aspirational ideologies nor managerial strategies are entirely effective, with many learners in voluntary organisations failing to align their thinking and practice with the theology or institutional logic on offer. Some retain their earlier views, some become negative or alienated, and only a minority convert to a new ideological position or identity.

- 3.13 Learning – whether formal or informal – has been seen as geared to recruitment, conversion to a new worldview or institutional logic, individual spiritual progress, the development of wider instrumental skills, and/or mobilisation to action, including violence.

4 LEARNING IN VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS

- 4.1 Terrorist learning has been defined as ‘the acquisition of knowledge to inform terrorist related activities in the future’.
- 4.2 In one recent study of terrorist learning four stages were identified (described in terms of lessons learned): *identification*, including both the acquisition and interpretation of a lesson, *distribution*, the sharing of a lesson with other learners, *retention*, when a lesson is recorded for future use, and *implementation*, when the lesson has been learned and the agent is ready to put it to use.
- 4.3 Terrorist learning has generally been discussed in terms of its efficiency and effectiveness, without consideration of the way in which actors impose ideological meaning on terrorist activity or the impact of terrorism on wider audiences.
- 4.4 However, in one account, of ‘becoming a committed insider’, attention was given to the acquisition of values, meaning, emotions and relationships. The stages in this process were identified as contact with charismatic leaders; initiation and the adoption of identifying marks and symbols; redefinition of the past and adoption of new values, including ‘demonization of the enemy’; sacrifice and hardship, including dissociation from previous relationships; loyal participation in the new way of life; the demonstration of commitment through actions; new status and role achieved.
- 4.5 Approaches by groups to ideological instruction have been diverse, with some being highly centralised and controlled in their transmission processes, and others exploiting a cell-like structure to share knowledge and maintain commitment. Diffuse or informal networks operate with more of a DIY ethos, although with

some social and ideological controls in place. Studies of lone actors suggest that autonomous learning also takes place.

- 4.6 The UK network of militant Islamists, al-Muhajiroun, provides an instructive case study of how organised extremist groups seek to transmit ideology. Although now banned, the network was permitted to operate openly for an extended period. Researchers and journalists were able to gain access to the network at various points, resulting in an insightful literature on the group's activities and learning.
- 4.7 External ideological transmission was a core feature of al-Muhajiroun. This was evident in the group's incessant publicity-seeking, its eagerness to engage with journalists, and its use of public protests and street stalls. The purpose of these activities was to instil in the receptive a sense of grievance and crisis.
- 4.8 Al-Muhajiroun sought to work internally with its activists to develop their ideological knowledge. Alongside the formal teaching of new recruits by leaders, informal learning – through a 'community of practice' – was a key component of instruction. It involved learning by companionship, shadowing an established practitioner, participation in street protest, as well as participation in formalised study groups. These interactions helped build group solidarity as well as developing knowledge and skills.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This is the executive summary of *Political and Religious Organisations*, which is the third report in a series of synthetic reviews on ideological transmission produced by Kim Knott and Benjamin Lee from the *Ideas, Beliefs And Values In Social Context* CREST programme.

The first report in the series, *The Family And Ideological Transmission*, focuses on the family as a context for ideological transmission, and includes case studies on extremism and terrorism.

The second report, *Peers, Education and Prisons*, focuses on peer-to-peer relationships as a context for ideological transmission, particularly in the context of education and prisons.



The *Ideas, Beliefs And Values In Social Context* programme has also produced an array of guides, such as *Understanding the far-right landscape* and *Sunni And Shi'a Islam: Differences And Relationships*

You can find all the reports, summaries, guides, articles and other outputs from this programme here:

www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/ideas-beliefs-values