

WHY TRANSMISSION?

Transmit *verb*

1. To cause (a thing) to pass, go, or be conveyed to another person, place or thing; to send across an intervening space; to convey, transfer.
2. To convey or communicate (usually something immaterial) to another or others; to pass on... to hand down.

The Oxford English Dictionary

Studying transmission focuses attention on how, where and by whom extremist ideologies are acquired and spread. Transmission can include ideas and skills, like bomb-making, as much as the beliefs and values about how such skills should be applied. Political scientists and scholars of religion have used the concept since the 1960s to signal the process by which ideas, beliefs and values are passed from parents to children, peer-to-peer, and from political and religious leaders to the party faithful, congregations and newcomers. Researchers link transmission to other processes: socialisation, development, education, and religious nurture. Studying extremist ideological transmission and how counter-messaging works needs to be seen within the broader context of child and adult learning, cultural acquisition, and political and religious communication. Similar processes are at work, whether the material to be transmitted is socially acceptable or not.

WHY IS 'TRANSMISSION' USEFUL?

Researching transmission draws attention to how ideologies are mediated, and how propaganda works. How do social groups, including radical ones, replicate the traditions and culture they have worked so hard to build? Why are some charismatic individuals and ideologues successful transmitters? What makes for an effective transmission process, and does the same process work for counter messaging?

Not everyone who acts violently and supports or carries out a terrorist attack is necessarily motivated by deep-seated beliefs and values, but many are. For these people, it is important for us to understand how emotion, rhetoric, and the power of stories or images work to enable ideas to stick and behaviours to be learned.

Transmission is more successful in particular places and at particular times of our lives, hence the focus on home and school, when children are developing. But other locations are important too. Prisons are closed spaces where vulnerable people may adopt new ideas, practices and social relationships, for self-protection, personal gain or self-improvement. Converting to a religion or joining a gang is not uncommon, but research shows this should not be equated with radicalisation, even though some converts and gang members may go on to act violently after leaving prison.

The medium of communication also affects successful transmission. Does the message favour speech or image, tweets or monologues, direct appeals or interaction?



Is it closed and secure, or is it broadcast publicly? The internet offers easy and private engagement with extremist ideologies. Social media can act as an 'echo chamber' that narrows users' exposure to diverse views and critical perspectives. Understanding the nature and power of the medium is vital for the interception of messages and gathering of extremist material, as well as the insertion of counter messages, whether by security practitioners or grassroots activists.

THE LIMITATIONS AND BENEFITS FOR SECURITY RESEARCHERS AND PRACTITIONERS

Security threats are diverse, and the tools for researching them must be too. Studying ideological transmission adds to our understanding of these threats. But it is not a substitute for research on identity, behaviour, social movements, mental health, risk, and technological innovation.

What understanding transmission does not do is presuppose any direct route to violent action. Neither does it support a causal link between extremist views and acts of terrorism. Research on religious and political groups, prisons and student societies stresses that extreme ideas, beliefs and values can be shared and newcomers brought into the circle of transmission without violence being the necessary result. Nevertheless, some extremist groups do endorse and preach violence, with a number going on to commission or inspire terrorist attacks. As yet there are no short-cuts to pinpointing those that do.

What this approach does is focus thinking on how, where, when and by whom ideologies are passed on. Understanding more about transmission in general can help practitioners to distinguish what counts as routine from what is irregular or unusual. It can help in the identification of nascent ideologies, venues and leaders, as well as vulnerable groups and new channels of communication. They can then be assessed as potential nodes in a chain of extremist or counter-extremist messaging.

Finally, knowing what makes for effective transmission more broadly must also be of value within security organisations for the sharing of good ideas and employment practices.

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