

CREST

Public-facing Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communication Campaigns: Using 'the STARS Framework' to Map and Respond to Some Key Challenges

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INTRODUCTION

The Situational Threat and Response Signals (STARS) project responds to the challenge of how to communicate effectively with the public about terrorism risks and threats in an increasingly complex and fragmented information environment. The 'STARS framework' helps practitioners to ensure that all the main elements and tensions potentially 'in play' are being considered in public-facing counter-terrorism (CT) strategic communication campaigns, with corresponding options for actions and techniques to tackle common problems.

The study's main finding is that how campaigns are 'read', is influenced by a range of 'situational' factors. Understanding what these are and how they interact with campaign communications assets, can help to make them more effective while minimising unintended consequences. The research provides practitioners with a step-by-step framework to this effect, included at the end of this report.

The study started with a broad multi-disciplinary review of academic literature, available here: www.crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/stars-literature-review. Our literature review identified a wide range of intersecting variables that impact on the strategic communication process, providing a strong foundation for the subsequent primary data collection phase of the project.

We centred the rest of our data gathering around three UK CT campaigns: See it, Say it, Sorted (SiSiS), Action Counters Terrorism (ACT) and Security On Your Side



(SOYS). Taking a view that context is likely to matter, we included a comparative angle through attention to different (urban and rural) parts of the UK: England, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

We analysed the campaigns in four ways:

1. A 'frame analysis' studying the visuals and language of campaign assets;
2. 20 in-depth practitioner interviews exploring the campaign materials and their use 'in context';
3. 7 Focus groups including 52 members of the public. Specific assets from the three campaigns were discussed and used as a starting point for wider conversation about terrorism and CT interventions;
4. Social media analysis of reactions and engagement towards the campaigns, where data was available.

The full report can be found here: www.crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/stars-framework-full-report/

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

The key problem that campaign delivery teams encounter in their practice is constructing a ‘normal’ terror threat, without it tipping into fear mongering, or becoming so normalised that people disengage. At the same time, campaign messaging needs to highlight particular features (e.g., unattended bags) that should signal to people that there is a need to be alarmed, in order that they decide to act.

WHEN IS ‘NORMAL’ NOT NORMAL?

SiSiS, ACT and SOYS all frame terrorism threats in ordinary, routine contexts, making the point that – although rare – terror attacks arise in normal rather than exceptional circumstances. This study finds that threats in ‘normal’ scenarios are communicated and processed in two main ways¹:

- **Normalisation:** when previously unusual or exceptional situations or objects are translated into accepted and expected events or scenarios.
- **Anomalisation:** when things or situations which appear orderly and ‘normal’ are specifically presented as potential threats.

FAME AND FEAR

In conducting this study, we identified two key tensions that frustrate the design and delivery of CT campaigns:

1. It is easy to be lured into a *‘fear trap’*. When CT campaigns try to ‘outbid’ other risks or even different types of terrorist threat, they can – without meaning to – create the negative emotional reactions being sought by terrorists. This is particularly problematic when audiences have been directly affected by terrorism or routinely encounter violence and threat, running the risk that such messaging could be traumatic. Equally, balancing levels of reassurance against enough fear to command public attention is challenging, particularly within those communities where terrorism or threat is relatively ‘normal’.
2. Alternatively, creating ‘too much’ awareness of terrorism in the general population can be a *‘fame trap’*. It comes from trying to get attention and cut through in the crowded, noisy information environment. Additionally, there is the issue that publics 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’.

¹ For our conceptual framework, we have leaned on Goffman’s (1971) work on ‘normal appearances’, and Vaughan’s (1996) concept of the ‘normalisation of deviance’. See report for full references and further detail.

FIVE KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- 1. What is ‘normal’ varies across time and location.** In some places, terrorism is ‘normal’; this also stands in terms of the types of ‘normal’ crime risks people are more attuned to. Regardless of ‘the facts’ about terrorism, it is easy for people to explain away a sense of risk.
- 2. Certain terrorism incidents act as agenda setters – they frame ‘what terrorism looks like’** and where it can be expected. At the same time, people make risk judgements based on gut feelings about others’ behaviour, rather than (solely) specified objects of concern.
- 3. There is such a thing as bad publicity:** when people become over-exposed to messages they ‘tune out’ - familiarity doesn’t always equal engagement. Over time, CT campaigns create a narrative in the way publics receive and ‘read’ them. Coordinating across campaigns is likely to enhance effectiveness and efficiency. Equally, sometimes it is better to do nothing.
- 4. Wider context impacts message cut-through, in particular the trust climate.** Where conventional routes and authorities are distrusted, local community alternatives may bring benefits. Tackling distrust, as opposed to building trust, requires different interventions.
- 5. While social media can increase reach, people remember campaign messages delivered through traditional and ‘up close’ methods.** The ‘right balance’ for campaigns is between, not just managing the tensions that underpin particular techniques, but also between broad mass mediated and more ‘traditional’ local approaches.

STARS FRAMEWORK

The framework addresses the key considerations, techniques, mitigating and moderating factors in relation to the 'S - Situation', 'T - Threat', 'R - Response', 'S - Signals' parts of the framework. The key components of the framework are outlined alongside:

- **Considerations:** critical questions to consider that align with key communicative and contextual challenges;
- **Technique:** common messaging / influencing techniques available and adopted by practitioners when seeking to respond to these considerations;
- **Mitigate:** linked environmental tensions to think about when planning to employ a technique;
- **Moderate:** actions and strategies that may help to moderate or alleviate the impact of these tensions.

The 'A - Adapt' element of the STARS acronym acts as a recurring prompt woven throughout the framework, rather than sitting as a separate consideration.

The framework is not an exhaustive list, nor a set of ‘must do’ rules, but a series of options, derived from empirical research. The different categories are shown separately for clarity, but of course in reality they will have areas of overlap.



PUBLIC-FACING COUNTER-TERRORISM STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGNS: USING 'THE STARS FRAMEWORK' TO MAP AND RESPOND TO SOME KEY CHALLENGES



Key Considerations



- What is the location and likely activity of the intended audience to be influenced, e.g., urban, rural, travelling?
- Are the principal audiences likely to trust messaging from government / police?



- Is the threat being centred the right one, and does it cohere with public concerns?
- What is the temporal threat situation like? E.g., have there been recent terror attacks?



Continually reviewing and adapting assets, methods, and logics in light of evolving contexts is a key thread of good practice, e.g., can new technologies be used to develop and deliver the message in innovative ways? Should 'new' threat scenarios be portrayed?



- What cognitive, emotional and behavioural responses are being sought and is this clearly communicated?
- What other messages are being sent by government?
- Have assets been used recurrently/in the same form?



- Within deployed assets, are the signals of risk that the public should attend to clearly demarcated?
- How can and why would the public 'signal back'?



SITUATION



Considerations – what are the key questions here?

- What is the location and likely activity of the intended audience to be influenced, e.g., urban, rural, travelling?
- Are the principal audiences likely to trust messaging from government / police?



Technique – what are the tools for addressing this?

- Localised, 'normal', everyday scenes
- One-way dissemination
- Partnership seeking
- Community messengers



Mitigate – what are the issues in the way?

- × Public's hyperlocal preoccupation
- × Diffusion of the message
- × (Dis)Trust Climate



Moderate – what approaches might work?

- ✓ Identify local norms of risk and threat in areas / activities for 'hooks' for core message
- ✓ Communicate successful local disruptions
- ✓ Consider tailored methods (not just messages)
- ✓ Think small: 'micro areas' for captive audience
- ✓ Set a realistic trust benchmark
- ✓ Identify avenues for community engagement and delivery



THREAT



Considerations – what are the key questions here?

- Is the threat being centred the right one, and does it cohere with public concerns?
- What is the temporal threat situation like? E.g., have there been recent terror attacks?



Technique – what are the tools for addressing this?

- Fear or reassurance appeals
- Appeals to wider crime or public safety concerns
- Aftermath targeting



Mitigate – what are the issues in the way?

- × 'Fear traps'
- × Reinforcement of (crime) concerns / dilution of terrorism threat
- × Agenda-setting framing



Moderate – what approaches might work?

- ✓ Communicate broader benefits for crime and public safety – link to a wider inclusive agenda - but don't disguise CT central goal
- ✓ Be mindful of potential traumatic effects and risk of 'turning off' the audience
- ✓ Consider when and how agenda setting events should be reinforced e.g., anniversaries rather than direct aftermath



RESPONSE



Considerations – what are the key questions here?

- What cognitive, emotional and behavioural responses are being sought and is this clearly communicated?
- What other messages are being sent by government?
- Have assets been used recurrently / in the same form?



Technique – what are the tools for addressing this?

- Graphics, framing, discourse, and design
- Recurrent techniques
- Multiple mediums



Mitigate – what are the issues in the way?

- × 'Fame traps'



Moderate – what approaches might work?

- ✓ Clear call to action, accessible words / visuals
- ✓ Pursue emotional connection and narrative
- ✓ Communicate desired behavioural response and the positive outcomes, not just the threat
- ✓ Evaluation: capture metrics beyond recall, pre and post delivery
- ✓ Build planned-for review and refresh stages for visual and audio assets
- ✓ Identify coordination and conflict points across government / authorities
- ✓ Embrace new media but don't neglect 'traditional' / face to face methods
- ✓ Leave space for grassroots 're-framing'



SIGNALS



Considerations – what are the key questions here?

- Within deployed assets, are the signals of risk that the public should attend to clearly demarcated?
- How can and why would the public ‘signal back’?



Technique – what are the tools for addressing this?

- Specify what to spot



Mitigate – what are the issues in the way?

- × ‘Fame traps’



Moderate – what approaches might work?

- ✓ Exploit ‘gut plays’
- ✓ Demonstrate responsiveness and outcomes – legitimate anomalies
- ✓ Explain ‘confidential reporting’
- ✓ Signpost clear reporting mechanisms
- ✓ Reassure the audience that it is better to report even when uncertain, than to do nothing – it won’t get them in trouble or waste police time

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This Key Findings Briefing comes from part of the *Situational Threat and Response Signals (STARS) project*. This project responds to the challenge of how to communicate effectively with the public about terrorism risks and threats in an increasingly complex and fragmented information environment. To read the Full Report this briefing was produced from, as well as other outputs from this project, visit our website: www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/situational-threat-and-response-signals-stars/

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