

Situational Threat and Response Signals (STARS):

What Drives Public Understanding and Engagement with Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communication Campaigns?

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This briefing outlines key findings from a broad multi-disciplinary review of academic literature published between 2011 and 2022, relevant to the topic of *public facing counter-terrorism (CT) strategic communication campaigns*. It forms part of a wider project looking at how and why campaigns achieve variable levels of traction and public influence. Some illustrative studies have been flagged in this briefing, while the full review is available here: www.crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/stars-literature-review

The review demonstrates that a wide range of linked factors impact on how public-facing CT communication campaign materials are ‘read’ and understood. Some key recurring themes were identified that can be used to inform the design and delivery of current and future campaigns. The full STARS report containing our empirical data is available here: www.crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/stars-framework-full-report/

WHAT DOES THE LITERATURE TELL US?

Situations	<p>Particular situations, contexts, and local norms transform threat and riskⁱ</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Terrorism ‘problems’ are situated within wider socio-political dynamics, which impact on public responses to CT messaging. • People often equate ‘home’ and routine with safety even when they live in places directly affected by conflict and terrorism. • Persistent, sensationalised media coverage can reduce vigilance when it doesn’t reflect lived experience.
Threats	<p>Threat and risk perception relies on knowledge and trustⁱⁱ</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some threats are less easily understood and recognised than others. These need different communication strategies to make them easier to grasp – such as visual messaging, metaphor, references to popular culture. • CT professionals and the public sometimes understand ‘suspicious activity’ differently; working towards shared understanding enables better guidance. • People listen to – and feel safe to raise concerns to – those (people or organisations) that they trust.
Responses	<p>Demographics, social interactions and life experiences inform responses to threatsⁱⁱⁱ</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Human perceptions are skewed by bias and lived experience as part of a particular social group – gender, ethnicity, national and social identities affect what risks and threats we perceive and how we deal with them. • Social networks – ‘those like us’ - are an effective means of conveying threat and risk information.
Signals	<p>Campaign signalling can produce intended and unintended effects^{iv}</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signals are sent (sometimes unintentionally) via social cues and context, as well as by design. • People often perceive risk and threat based on their gut feelings. • Messages intended to cause particular positive or negative emotions, such as ‘fear appeals’, must find the right balance to trigger motivation, rather than disengagement or other adverse reaction. • Narratives and community-based initiatives can be effective ‘nudges’. • ‘One-way’ information-sharing campaigns can unintentionally cause public complacency – calls to action and participation are necessary.

Endnotes

- i. See: Jarvis, L., & Lister, M. (2016) 'What would you do? Everyday conceptions and constructions of counter-terrorism', *Politics*, 36(3): 277–291.
- ii. See: Perko, T., Thijssen, P., Turcanu, C. and Baldwin, V.G. (2014) 'Insights into the reception and acceptance of risk messages: nuclear emergency communication', *Journal of Risk Research*, 17(9): 1207-1232.
- iii. See: Gin, J.L., Stein, J.A., Heslin, K.C. and Dobalian, A. (2014) 'Responding to risk: Awareness and action after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks', *Safety Science*, 65(2014): 86-92.
- iv. See: Heath, R.L., Lee, J., Lemon, L.L. (2019) 'Narratives of risk communication: Nudging community residents to shelter-in-place', *Public Relations Review*, 45(1):128-137

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This Literature Review 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 Literature Review 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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