

Briefing Note

Mass media and persuasion: Evidence-based lessons for strategic communications in CVE

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Purpose

The Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS has invested heavily in strategic communications as one of its key pillars. It has particularly invested in uses of mass media (e.g., counter and alternative messaging, ex-member and survivor testimonies, satire, user-generated content, etc.) to counter the appeal of ISIS and their propaganda. However, there is a weak evidence base to determine whether any of these efforts are having their desired impact. Nonetheless, there is decades of research on the circumstances under which mass media persuades human behaviour and thought, some of which comes from research on conflict and jihadist-linked radicalisation contexts. This policy brief summarises the key findings from this interdisciplinary endeavour and draws insights for effective strategic communications use in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) efforts, with a focus on counter-ISIS activities.

Key findings

Mass media persuasion by itself rarely, if ever, works at changing people's foundational beliefs or values – but it can change their behaviour.

- ▶ **Research shows that mass media alone has no measurable effect on belief change.** Trying to change supporters or members of groups like ISIS or Al Qaeda's beliefs or values via mass media tools alone is not likely to work.
- ▶ **Mass media can change behaviour by changing perceptions of social norms.** When people perceive that their behaviours are out of step with the norms of their group they adjust to the norms. Social norm interventions through mass media can reduce willingness to join terrorist groups like ISIS or Al Qaida.
- ▶ **Mass persuasion can increase the commitment to already held beliefs.** Research shows that mass media which "preaches to the choir" can increase action-orientation. ISIS propaganda can inspire passive supporters into action. Conversely, CVE mass media efforts can inspire those with anti-ISIS sentiments to increase their activism.

Key findings

If belief change is the goal, such as in deradicalisation, person-to-person interaction is required, though mass media can augment efforts.

- ▶ **Credible messengers dialoguing with someone can make that person change political sides, convert religions, or join/leave an extremist group.** Deradicalisation requires person-to-person dialogue, not mass media.
- ▶ **Credible messengers have two perceived qualities: authority and benevolence.** The target of the belief-change message has to think that the messenger knows more about the subject than they do (authority) and that the messenger's incentives are aligned with the target's best-interests (benevolence). These are the qualities that people who seek to deradicalise ISIS members must be perceived as possessing.
- ▶ **People change core beliefs because they want to leave their current group for another group.** Belief change is the cost of entry to the other group. In order to deradicalise someone you have to offer them an alternative group which appeals to them. The credible messenger should be a member of that group.

Policy implications

Strategic communications policies for P/CVE purposes should be informed by research demonstrating when mass media versus person-to-person interaction are most effective. The findings from this policy brief highlight some important guidelines to this effect:

Mass media is ineffective at belief change but useful for behaviour change.

- ▶ **Summary information, such as results from opinion polls, can be used to alter perceptions of social norms.** This information must come from sources that the targets deem as legitimate and be communicated to them on platforms that they trust. For instance, polls from advocacy groups that the target population distrusts, disseminated in mainstream media (presumably also distrusted by target groups) will not be very effective. What sources and platforms are considered trustworthy is context-dependent and local subject matter experts should be consulted.
- ▶ **Highly influential people among the target group, known as social referents, can be effective means by which to shape social norms.** Among extremists these are often peer-group members who can be either part of an online or offline community. Social network analysis can be used to help identify these influential individuals.

- ▶ **Three elements are particularly important for norm interventions to affect behaviour.** Firstly, the target should identify with the source of the norm intervention; this usually means the target sees themselves as part of the referent group from which the norm intervention is being deployed. Secondly, the norms should be believable opinions or behaviours of the group. For instance, interventions that try to convince target group members that their referent group believes in homosexual or women's rights in a culture where that is unlikely to be the case will not be effective. Thirdly, new norms should not deviate too far from the target group's actual beliefs. For instance, if salafi-jihadi attitudes are held by a target group, it is more effective to push for norms that disagree with the violence associated with these beliefs rather than trying to change the overall political belief system into something aligned with liberal democracy.

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Person-to-person interaction is needed for belief change.

- ▶ **In order to deradicalise, or otherwise change a person's beliefs, the target of the message must feel disaffected from the extremist group.** This means that the timing of a deradicalisation programme should be carefully selected to match the moment a person is willing to abandon their previous beliefs. This often co-occurs with feeling victimised by the extremist group or having lost a sense of community with them. Mental health issues such as depression and anxiety may be signs of such a state of being. Under these conditions a person may be willing to seek alternative moral communities.
- ▶ **Credible messengers should be carefully selected to come from the right kind of alternative groups.** They should be seen as benevolent but also authoritative in order to speak to the target's previous belief systems. In addition, they should come from a community that is close to or part of the target's already-held referent groups. There can be more than one credible messenger deployed to address these goals.

- ▶ **Listening to the target is important to identify their needs and how to match them with the appropriate alternative group.** People join extremist groups for different reasons and they leave for different reasons. Some may be dispositionally more adventure-seeking while others may be more intellectually inclined. Understanding their drives and needs helps to match the target with the right alternative community.

Mass media persuasion can be used to lower the chances of violence without changing beliefs.

- ▶ **Belief change is not necessary for someone to move from a violent to a non-violent trajectory.** Research on people who leave terrorist groups shows a higher rate of disengagement rather than deradicalisation.¹ Disengagement is when a person no longer actively participates in the activities of a terrorist or extremist group but continues to passively believe in the former group's ideology. Deradicalisation is when a person denounces the value system of the former group. Most people who leave terrorist groups disengage and most of them do not re-engage, though recidivism does happen, if rarely.² Disengagement with programmes to reduce recidivism can be sufficient to mitigate violence.

Findings

Finding: Mass media has little to no effect on belief change.

Many P/CVE strategic communications – or strat comms – initiatives explicitly or implicitly assume that mass media persuasion, especially those that have strong emotional appeals, can motivate people to join or not join a terrorist group like ISIS.³ However, this is not a safe assumption to make given decades of social and behavioural science research across a variety of domains. A recent scoping review of the literature found that mass persuasion rarely, if ever, works regardless of the domain.⁴ In the religious domain, proselytisation by preachers on TV, radio, internet videos, or in the street is rarely effective.⁵ Surprisingly, even mass advertising for commercial products shows little effect when a consumer already has experience with a product.⁶ Emotional appeals such as using sex and celebrities do not help sell products unless the celebrity is an expert in the domain that they are advertising where it shows a small effect.⁷

More relevantly, we see that even political campaigns' mass messaging efforts do not seem to work. Robo calls, negative ads, and online commercials are all non-predictive of long-term shifts in voter choice.⁸ Even more relevant for our purposes is the research on Nazi propaganda. Nazi anti-Jewish propaganda worked well in areas where anti-Semitism was historically high but had a negative (i.e. backfire effect) in areas where it was historically low.⁹ Other Nazi propaganda efforts largely failed at influencing Germans. For instance, they tried and failed at convincing Germans to be pro-euthanasia and they tried and failed at making industrial workers anti-communist.¹⁰ They even tried and failed at making Germans like the Nazis;¹¹ Hitler himself was popular with the public, but the Nazi party was not.¹²

These findings are consistent with the lack of evidence showing that people were motivated to join

groups like ISIS or al Qaida (AQ) just by consuming their magazines and videos alone.¹³ A recent analysis looking at every completed and thwarted jihadist-linked attack between 2014 and 2021 across eight Western countries (439 cases across 245 attacks) found that only 2% of all cases were ostensibly radicalised online through consuming of ISIS mass messaging in an asocial way, i.e. with no individual contact through offline or online means.¹⁴ Rather, 81% were radicalised in a social and mostly one-

to-one way (54% were radicalised offline socially; 17.5% online socially; 9% online and offline socially; an additional 17% had an unknown radicalisation pathway). All of this research challenges the idea that humans, regardless of the domain, are susceptible to mass persuasion. Specifically, it also challenges the utility of things like counter-messaging as a deterrent to terrorist group recruitment. However, mass persuasion does have a role to play in the ecology of persuasion.

Finding: Mass media can change perceptions of social norms which can lower violent propensities of extremists.

Social norms are the range of beliefs and behaviours that are considered acceptable within a given group. Changing people's perceptions of the social norms of their group can influence their behaviour without changing their beliefs. Large-scale randomised control trial research in Rwanda¹⁵ and the Democratic Republic of the Congo¹⁶ has shown that social norms embedded in serial dramas increased cooperation and reconciliation in conflict ridden areas via changes in perceptions of social norms. Meaning, after a year of consuming serial dramas that dealt with intergroup tensions, people now felt that other ingroup members thought that reconciliation and cooperation was important. This shift in perception of social norms was not associated with any change in personal beliefs. It did, however, lead to an increase in reconciliatory and cooperative behaviour. Similar findings were also found in Mali, Nigeria, and Nepal but focusing on domestic violence and using offline social norm interventions.¹⁷

Such findings are consistent with neuroimaging research conducted on jihadist supporters. Pakistani Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT, an associate of al Qaeda) supporters rated their willingness to fight and die (WFD) for their sacred values (e.g., strict sharia, expanding Caliphate, etc.) while in a brain scanner.¹⁸ When conducting this task, the Dorsolateral Prefrontal Cortex (DLPFC), an area of the brain associated with deliberation and self-control, was found to be deactivated, it was essentially "offline". However, another region associated with integrating emotions into decision-making, the Ventromedial Prefrontal Cortex (VMPFC), remained active. Normally, these two regions are both active when making decisions as people simultaneously integrate emotions while engaging in self-control when deciding what to do. Indeed, this normal pattern of behaviour is what was witnessed for non-sacred values. When evaluating WFD for sacred values,

however, only the area integrating emotions was active. This implies that LeT supporters were not "deliberating" when deciding their WFD for sacred values. The question then became: how can one re-activate deliberative areas of the brain to reduce WFD?

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Changing people's perceptions of the social norms of their group can influence their behaviour without changing their beliefs.

In the second part of the study, the LeT supporters, while still in the scanner, were presented with the average WFD of the broader Pakistani community (collected via survey), which were either lower or the same as theirs (unbeknownst to the LeT supporters, the responses were made up). Seeing that other Pakistanis were not as willing to fight and die as them, the DLPFC (area associated with deliberation) came back "online". In addition, the DLPFC began "communicating" with the VMPFC (i.e. area associated with integrating emotions).¹⁹ This led to the LeT supporters lowering their explicit WFD to match that of the broader community. This lowering of explicit willingness to use violence was predicted by the degree of re-activation of the DLPFC.

In other words, when an intervention changed LeT supporters' perception of the social norms (i.e. ingroup's WFD) their neural deliberation pathways "re-opened" and this reduced their behavioural intentions to match that of the group. And this was

accomplished simply by presenting the (made up) results of a survey to them.²⁰

Social norm interventions that target behaviour change have been used in a wide variety of contexts. The interventions themselves come in the form of entertainment programmes, influential community members, or summary information (e.g., survey results).²¹ The caveat is that social norms need to come from a group of which the extremist sees themselves as a member. Violent extremist groups


seek to reduce their adherents' group memberships to only that of the extremist group. This technique will be most effective with those members of violent extremist groups who still feel identified with a non-extremist community and therefore the perception of the social norms of that community can be leveraged to alter the behaviour of the extremist. This evidence is part of broader research findings which show that media interventions can shift not only social norms but also build social capital, contribute to peace, and encourage disengagement.²²

Finding: Mass media persuasion can increase commitment to already held beliefs. This can be leveraged to increase CVE community interventions.

Mass persuasion can increase the commitment to beliefs that are already held by the individual or community. The aforementioned research on those exposed to Nazi propaganda in the 1930s-1940s showed that the messaging only worked on those who already held antisemitic sentiments.²³ Research on political ads shows that they only work on increasing fervour among the base.²⁴ This finding interacts with the one above. If you can convince people who already hold a belief that others also hold it and are acting on it, this causes bandwagon effects, herding, and can lead to a critical mass of people acting on them such as with increasing voter turnout, or activism.²⁵

Such a technique might be useful in motivating the masses that are, for example, anti-ISIS to take a stronger stance and could lower bystander effects (i.e., people who are aware of an imminent attack but don't say anything). In one study, it was found that in 64% of terrorist attacks there was at least one non-extremist friend or family member of the attacker who

was aware of the impending attack but did nothing to notify authorities.²⁶ Other studies in the US²⁷ and Denmark²⁸ found that these bystanders are reluctant to notify authorities for a variety of reasons including fear of reprisals, overly punitive measures towards their loved-one, and stigmatisation. Mass persuasion targeted to non-extremists (unlike counter-narratives) can increase their commitment to act on behalf of their already-held antagonism towards groups like ISIS and potentially lower bystander effects.

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Finding: To change beliefs, such as in deradicalisation, you need person-to-person interaction.

If you want to change actual beliefs then you will need person-to-person interaction. Research on religious conversion shows that the main way people change beliefs is through a close personal friend who belongs to the other religion.²⁹ Research on political belief change (e.g., leftwing to rightwing or vice versa) shows this change in belief systems usually occurs when a person adopts a new circle of friends who hold opposing political beliefs, as happens when

someone moves from a predominantly leftwing to a rightwing, or vice versa, city or neighbourhood.³⁰ Recent analysis of Syria-bound foreign fighters from the West found that in 88% of cases there was some online or offline social interaction involved in their recruitment, meaning they were not just consuming online propaganda but were actively engaging with other radicals in person or over the internet.³¹ Previous research on Al Qaida diaspora cells found

that 75% of members were recruited by a friend and 20% by a family member.³² The aforementioned research on the radicalisation pathways of every known jihadist-linked attacker in eight Western countries between 2014 and 2021 showed that person-to-person social interaction was involved in

the radicalisation process in 81% of cases. Successful recruitment happens person-to-person rather than through mass marketing means. Similarly, if the goal is deradicalisation, then person-to-person interaction should be the primary means of affecting this belief change.

Finding: Target of communications must be disaffected for belief change to occur.

The target must not be very well-embedded in a social group. Those who convert religions,³³ switch political sides,³⁴ or radicalise,³⁵ are those who are already disaffected or hold weak allegiance to their previous group. However, more research is needed to identify the threshold of allegiance strength or disaffection required for this “willingness to convert” to take place. Their needs, whatever those may be, are not being met by their current group affiliations and, in some cases, they may be actively ostracised by their current groups.³⁶ This is true for those who become open to joining an extremist group but also for those who are willing to leave an extremist group.³⁷ Research on why people leave terrorist groups, cults, or other organisations shows that it is often because they feel some sense of victimisation by their current group. This makes them open to group change.

Social exclusion can reduce feelings of allegiance to a particular group and increase allegiance towards extremist groups, or vice versa. Social exclusion has been shown to be a key driver in conflicts in Syria,³⁸ Somalia,³⁹ and Nigeria.⁴⁰ In another brain scan experiment, young Moroccan men raised in Spain were recruited to participate in a study in Barcelona.⁴¹ Before entering the scanner, each participant played a virtual toss ball game with three ethnically Spanish players. For half the Moroccan participants, the Spanish players stopped tossing them the ball after a few tosses and only played amongst each other (social exclusion condition). For the other half, the Spanish players continued to toss the ball to the Moroccan participants (control condition). Then participants laid in a scanner and evaluated their willingness to fight and die (WFD) for their sacred and non-sacred values related to jihadism (e.g. Caliphate, strict sharia, armed jihad, etc.).

There was no difference between those who were socially excluded and those who were included when it came to their sacred values. An area of the brain called the Left Inferior Frontal Gyrus activated for sacred values. However, those who were socially

excluded also had this area of their brain activate for their non-sacred values. In addition, they increased their WFD for their non-sacred values, approaching the levels of their sacred values. After getting out of the scanner some non-sacred values were now deemed sacred by psychometric measures. This means that social exclusion caused non-sacred values to sacralise as detected by both neural and behavioural means. This is an alarming shift as more sacred values increases a person’s level of radicalisation.

One interpretation of these findings is that people hold multiple identities (e.g. Spanish, Moroccan, Muslim, etc.). But when one of those groups excludes you, you might increase your allegiance to another group, especially if that other group presents itself as opposing the group that just excluded you. Things like social exclusion weaken the links with one group but can strengthen the links towards another group. In this case, the selected Moroccan-origin participants held a weak connection to jihadism beforehand but increased that connection, behaviourally and neurally after they felt socially excluded by one of their identity groups (i.e. Spaniards).

This happens both in the radicalisation process but also in the de-radicalisation process. Often, when people leave an extremist group or even a cult, it is because they were excluded/victimised by that group.⁴² This weakening of a link creates an opportunity for messaging to be delivered, especially if the person has maintained some identification with the non-extremist identity.

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Finding: **Credible messengers are required for belief change.**

For belief change to happen credible messengers (online or offline) are needed to interact with the target of persuasion. Credibility of a messenger is determined by two factors: benevolence and authority.⁴³

- **Benevolence:** The target of a message perceives the messenger as aligning with their own incentives. Meaning, the messenger is perceived to have the best interest of the target at heart. If the messenger is perceived to have ulterior motives other than the best interest of the target, that will lower their credibility (e.g., a messenger who works for the state may be seen as caring more about national security than the wellbeing of the target).
- **Authority:** the messenger is seen as knowing more about the subject matter than the target. For instance, there is anecdotal evidence of foreign terrorist fighters in Syria recruiting others by telling them “what’s really going on” there (i.e., painting a heroic picture of ISIS activities). The recruits trusted the version of reality from the people they personally knew who were on-the-ground over what they heard in the media. Another example are recruiters who were perceived as experts in Islamic ideology; those messengers were perceived as more authoritative about what Islam implored Muslims to do than that of the recruits’ parents or local religious leaders.

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Credibility of a messenger is determined by two factors: benevolence and authority.

The key element for both factors is that the messenger is *perceived* as possessing those qualities. Whether they are objectively benevolent or authoritative does not matter. For example, Islamic clerics are often brought into prisons to engage in deradicalisation work.⁴⁴ However, research has not been able to identify whether these clerics have any positive impact as their effect cannot be isolated from other deradicalisation efforts being implemented simultaneously. Indeed, there has been anecdotal evidence of these clerics being ridiculed by the target populations as heretics and treating fellow inmates who talk to them as “traitors”.⁴⁵ If the target does not perceive the messenger as benevolent or authoritative, the messenger will not be seen as credible. Research, such as talking to extremists, allows for the understanding of their worldview and perceptions, which is crucial for finding credible messengers.

Finding: **Alternative groups must be offered for belief change to occur.**

Belief change that leads to a new moral identity, as in deradicalisation, means (by definition) that the person is joining a new moral tribe/group.⁴⁶ People who deradicalise either change to a new moral identity/group or go back to their pre-radicalisation identity/group.⁴⁷ Accepting the group’s core beliefs is the cost-of-entry to the new moral identity. As such, the group itself must be appealing to the target of the belief change. In other words, the group must offer things that respond to the needs of the potential new member (just as was the case when they initially radicalised).

These appeals can be quite wide ranging, from offering belonging, to purpose, to agency, to adventure, to family, to practical/financial benefits.⁴⁸ Research has shown that those who have successfully deradicalised and stayed that

way, joined a new moral group that satisfied their needs. Trying to change someone’s core beliefs independent of offering alternative beliefs linked to an alternative group is likely to fail. Even when one successfully argues against a person’s beliefs, it does not lead to a change in beliefs, only to “moral dumbfounding” where a person simply says that they cannot defend their beliefs but are not willing to change them either.⁴⁹

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Finding: Mass media can augment person-to-person efforts.

Mass media can augment all of the above efforts: Mass media can make someone aware of their lack of social embeddedness and increase a sense of disaffection; it can introduce them to or point them in the direction of credible messengers linked to an alternative group; it can show the appeal of those alternative groups. However, mass media persuasion is not a substitute for person-to-person persuasion when belief change is the goal; it is, at best, complimentary.

The main takeaway from this research is that both belief and behaviour change happen socially. Free floating mass media messages, such as in most early counter-messaging campaigns, will likely be ineffective. Policy that aims to affect those with violent thoughts or intentions must use social norms, credible messengers, and social activities to act as off-ramps for the target audience. Mass media can be a useful addition if used in conjunction with, rather than in lieu of, social levers. The evidence base highlighted above shows that person-to-person interaction is crucial to diverting or terminating the trajectories of potentially violent individuals.

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