ALBANY

Behind Enemy Minds

Linguistic fingerprints and Ideological Fragmentation

A summary of a lecture attended at Oxford University by the Airey Neave Trust

Overview

Has terror changed?

- There are definitely more groups than ever before (one estimate suggests the number of far-right VEOs increased by 320% from 2013-18). While they may share a common base ideology, there is often a diverse range of priorities and targets within them (a "salad bar ideology").
- At its core terrorism is still about violent communication (the 'propaganda of the deed'). The only real change is the amount that is now able to be disseminated. For example, at the height of its powers, the so-called Islamic State put out 35 propaganda videos a day.

An evaluation of previous PCVE campaigns

- Modern PCVE campaigns can be broken down into three components:
  a. Disrupt VE messaging.
  b. Provide credible alternative narratives.
  c. Understand the psychological drivers.
- Various methods have been attempted to achieve this, ranging from civil society mobilisation, to utilising algorithms to promote CVE material to those who have viewed VE content.
- All have failed, either by being too catch all or too confrontational, leading to psychological reactance - a form of mental/ideological retrenchment when people feel someone is trying to change their mind.
- Surmised by Jonathan Hall QC in June 2022: "the UK is still failing to adapt to lone actor terrorism."

Fundamentally, there has been too much focus on what people think rather than how they think. We must reorientate our PCVE strategies to be based on how people process information and at what cognitive level in order to tailor campaigns.

Cognitive Complexity (CC)

What is it?

- How an actor processes information.
- A low level of CC means an individual is more likely to see events in a more simplistic format, whereas a high level of CC would mean an individual will analyse and accept multiple viewpoints.
- It is important to note that CC is not necessarily fixed, nor does an individuals level correlate to morality of ability to respond to tasks. Someone with a low CC level may be more useful at the scene of an accident as they can prioritise and focus on the most important task (not overthinking as someone with a high CC level would). By contrast someone with a high CC level would be necessary for negotiations as it would require compromise based on empathy.
- Stress is a major factor effecting CC levels.
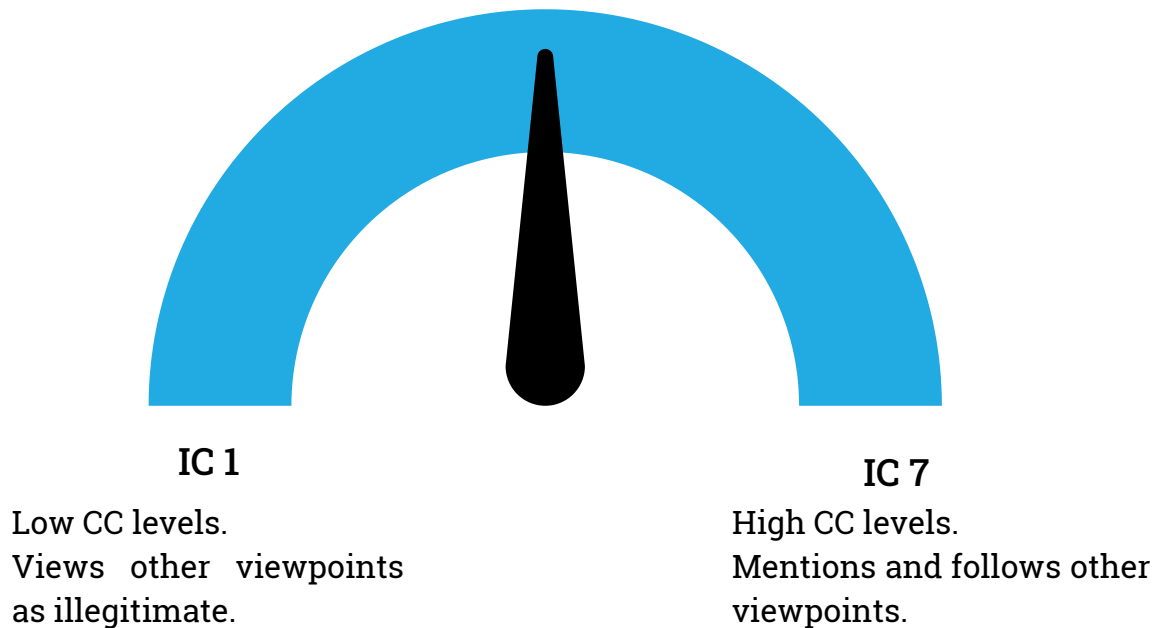
VEs and Cognitive Complexity

- Evidence suggests that VEs have low levels of cognitive complexity.
- Studies have suggested that this results from a past humiliation (real or imagined) that has cost the individual 'their sense of self.' Consequently they are orientated to prefer simplistic arguments and narratives to achieve cognitive closure.
- CC levels can often be discerned from propaganda outputs, and have been shown to decrease before attacks.
- Countering these narratives needs to be handled in a tailored way to decrease the likelihood of psychological reactance.

PCVE campaigns must make use of CC levels through a structured analytical approach that can guide counter-narratives and interventions: Integrative Complexity (IC)

Integrative Complexity (IC)

The process

- Measures verbal output and communications alongside structure and constructs of the output in order to measure CC levels on a scale of 1 (lowest) to 7 (highest).
- This would effectively create a linguistic fingerprint and indicators of flexibility/susceptibility to PCVE narratives and interventions.

IC 1
Low CC levels.
Views other viewpoints as illegitimate.

IC 7
High CC levels.
Mentions and follows other viewpoints.

Benefits

1. Can indicate an incoming attack.
2. Can be automated and easily scaled up to analyse VEO communications as well as individuals.
3. Has proven to be cross-culturally validated.
4. Even if actors were aware on this process occurring, it is still unsustainable to maintain or fake a different CC level across professional and personal communications. Making it resistant to disinformation/manipulation efforts.

Hypothetical scenario

Year is 2040 - a growing radical offshoot of the Action Now Movement (named Armed Action Now Movement - AANM) has become a growing security concern, with sources within the more moderate section of AANM expressing fears that some of their more radical members may turn to violence. The IC task force follows the following process.

1) Analyse commitment to violence

- A 6 month review of comms output is conducted using the IC format and scale.
- The result indicates that levels are decreasing (black and white arguments, hostile rejection of alternate viewpoints etc), indicating an increasing prevalence for resorting to violence.
- It is now clear action must be taken.

2) Disrupt recruitment

- After finding the sources of recruitment (Universities, youth centres etc), workshops are established in order to raise IC levels.
- These workshops would NOT focus on the topic of extremism, in order to reduce the risk of psychological reactance. Instead they would focus on contentious issues as a method of reducing dogmatic thinking.

3) Encourage moderates of EI to distance themselves from the radicals

- This would mainly be accomplished through backchannels (but could also be instigated by specialised communications in spheres more exclusively used by the, e.g. Telegram).
- There have been successes in the past with the Provisional IRA and Sinn Fein in brining The Troubles to a close.

Hypothetical scenario

4) Disrupt leadership of the radicals

- Point 1 could indicate different radical leaders individual commitments to violence through their individual IC levels.
- Those with higher IC levels could be targeted with multiple viewpoints and options to saturate them with information, basically causing cognitive overload and decision-making paralysis.
- Those with lower IC levels who show shaky commitment (new joiners, those less comfortable with indiscriminate violence etc) should be targeted with unambiguous messaging, creating a simple narrative for them to follow.
- Those with low IC who show a "diehard" commitment who would be at risk of psychological reactance should be targeted with ambiguous messaging based on the workshop model in point 2.

These methods are not just applicable to PCVE campaigns but also state-based violence, military operations and state-sponsored propaganda.