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Winning the Battle of the Memes

By Kumar Ramakrishna

Synopsis

In the ongoing struggle against violent extremism, winning the battle of the memes is very important. Four factors: Message, Messenger, Mechanism and Market Receptivity, are relevant in ensuring the “stickiness” of memes.

Commentary

DONALD TRUMP came to power promising that he would “make America great again”. Before him, Barack Obama captured national attention with his slogan: “Change we can believe in”. At home, President Halimah Yacob’s recent campaign for the elected presidency was launched with the slogan “Do good, do together”. President Halimah explained that she chose the slightly ungrammatical phrase as “it’s catchy, it’s easy to understand, easy for everyone to relate”. In general, the advertising world would concur.

Advertisers know that the best slogans - or memes - need not be grammatically correct, just memorable. Malcolm Gladwell in *The Tipping Point* recounts that in 1954, when the American tobacco company Winston introduced filter-tip cigarettes, it marketed them via the ungrammatical tagline “Winston tastes good *like* a cigarette should”, rather than “Winston tastes good as a cigarette should”. He notes that within months, “on the strength of that catchy phrase”, Winston outsold its major rivals and ultimately became the top cigarette brand in the country. Thus, an effective meme must be colloquial and memorable to work – not necessarily grammatical.

Quest for Information Dominance

In our modern, Internet-saturated world, there is a surfeit of news competing for our

attention via multiple channels such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and myriad other applications.

Mr Gladwell hence argues that whatever we are urged “to read and watch, we simply don’t remember”. It is precisely why modern actors – whether advertisers, political parties, governments and even terrorist groups – must fight to achieve information dominance over a target audience. This is because only through such control can the actor attain the ultimate goal of capturing the hearts and minds of the constituency in question. Hence the various slogans that comprise a wider overall narrative must be vivid enough to help attain information dominance.

This is no less true in countering violent extremism, or CVE. How then can one employ such memes to achieve information dominance over terrorist networks like ISIS? Four factors are important: the Message, the Messenger, the Mechanism and Market Receptivity.

The Message

First, the message encoded in the meme and wider narrative must be “sticky”. That is, simple to grasp and memorable. In rural Java for instance, popular traditional Muslim preachers have potentially great CVE utility because their messages, which contain familiar examples derived from daily experience, enable them to connect with the public deeply.

They are said to be able to transfix their listeners with their skillful use of allegories and stories, transforming Islamic messages into humorous anecdotes made up of highly recognisable material. In short, the intrinsic attractiveness of the message “sticks” in the minds of the audience long afterwards.

The Messenger

The messenger himself must enjoy significant personal credibility with the target audience. Selecting credible interlocutors is very audience-specific, moreover. Some Southeast Asian counter-terrorism officials for instance assert that globally famous progressive Muslim scholars – while well-known to mainstream audiences - are often dismissed by violent Islamist militants as “working for the government”.

Hence while such scholars may be effective in communicating with the wider community, former radicals may have relatively greater traction with the militant constituency. This is not new. In the 1950s, during the British colonial counterinsurgency campaign against the Communist Party of Malaya, while Government Information Services churned out publicity material for the public, surrendered Chinese guerrillas were effectively employed to persuade their former comrades in the Malayan jungles to surrender. CVE efforts today should therefore have a judicious mix of moderate scholars and carefully selected former radicals. The messenger conveying the meme matters too.

The Mechanism

While much has been said about the relative merits of communication mechanisms

such as the print, broadcast and online media, comparatively little attention has been placed on the underlying principles that should guide their use. Two principles from the relatively successful British psychological warfare effort in World War Two stand out.

First, the art of propaganda is to conceal that you are actually engaging in it. Hence regardless of media platform, one's narrative must not come across so blatantly as "propaganda". National campaigns calling on the public to stand firm against violent extremism are needed but the same messages should also be conveyed by "softer", indirect, nongovernmental means as well, such as blogs, podcasts, commentary and talk shows involving famous sports, media and entertainment personalities.

A second principle was captured in the saying: "Entertainment is a narcotic that dulls the sensitivities of the propaganda-conscious mind". Thus the British in 1950s Malaya invested in a strong Malayan Film Unit and Radio Malaya's Community Listening Service featuring the legendary Lee Dai Soh, to enthrall audiences with anti-Communist memes integrated with music, drama, humorous sketches and short films about the new lives of reformed guerillas. Similarly, the Dutch-Somali CVE analyst Ayaan Hirsi Ali calls for the use of humour and satire to undercut violent extremist appeals today. The British film *Four Lions*, about a group of wannabe terrorists, is one example of satirical entertainment as a way to promote the anti-extremist meme amongst vulnerable but wary audiences.

Market Receptivity

Finally, the effective absorption by an audience of memes is also influenced by situational context: put another way, are the "consumers" in the target market receptive to your "products"? In September 1949, the British High Commissioner's amnesty for Malayan Communists failed but by August 1957, Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman's Merdeka Amnesty succeeded spectacularly in generating surrenders. Why? One key factor was that in 1949 the public knew the government was not winning, but by Tunku's time, it was patently obvious that it finally was.

Similarly, in today's CVE context, as long as political and socio-economic grievances that underpin Muslim separatism in southern Philippines remain relatively unaddressed, we will likely see more sieges such as the current standoff between Islamic State linked militants and the Philippines military in Marawi City in Mindanao. No amount of counter-extremist memes and narratives can resolve the situation if the "market" is not receptive.

Winning the Battle of the Memes

The Marawi example underscores that Southeast Asia today is in the crosshairs of ISIS. This includes a concerted extremist social media onslaught seeking to polarize our respective multicultural societies. Positive, "sticky" national narratives and their constituent memes, therefore, remain essential if we are to neutralise ISIS in this "battle of the memes".

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