PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM: MEASUREMENT PARADOXES AND PITFALLS

Jamie Bartlett is Director of the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media and Head of the Violence and Extremism Program at the UK think-tank Demos.

Carl Miller is the Research Director of the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media at Demos, and a researcher at Kings College London. Both authors specialize in the use of social media for intelligence and security purposes, and have published widely on the subject of terrorism, extremism, intelligence, and counter-terrorism.

ABSTRACT

The authors examine the difficulties inherent in measuring counter-terrorism prevention work, suggesting that there is a "measurement paradox": evaluating of prevention work is essential, extremely difficult, and cannot always be widely published. Because evaluating prevention work requires measuring a non-event, there is a risk of declining public support for successful prevention efforts. The authors speculate that this paradox may worsen in future, and suggest some ways which policy makers might respond.

RÉSUMÉ

Les auteurs de cet article examinent les difficultés inhérentes dans la tentative de mesurer les effets de la prévention du terrorisme et suggèrent qu'il existe un « paradoxe lié à la mesure » des résultats de ce travail : l'évaluation des efforts de prévention du terrorisme est essentielle, extrêmement difficile à effectuer, et les résultats de ce travail ne peuvent pas toujours être rendus publics. Puisque évaluer les efforts de prévention du terrorisme nécessite de mesurer un évènement que l'on veut prévenir, un « non-évènement » en quelque sorte, il existe un risque que l'intérêt du public envers les efforts de prévention réussis se détériore. Les auteurs émettent la supposition que ce paradoxe peut s'aggraver dans l'avenir et suggèrent quelques avenues que les législateurs devraient explorer afin d'éviter que cela ne se produise.

In this short commentary, we focus on the difficulties of measuring the effectiveness of initiatives designed to prevent terrorism. Preventing terrorism before it takes place is an important part of any counter-terrorism strategy, particularly given the homegrown threat we currently face. Although it is difficult to define precisely because it covers so many different policy areas, Charles Farr, head of the UK's Office of Security and Counter Terrorism, sums up prevention strategies as targeting "that much larger group who feel a degree of negativity, if not hostility towards the state, the country, the community, and who are, as it were, the pool in which the terrorists can swim."[1] Draining this pool of support has become an increasingly important part of security on both sides of the Atlantic.

In all public services, we need to know what works and what does not, and this is no more true and important than in the discharge of the Government's principal responsibility: making society dependably and predictably safe and secure. Public money spent to that end must also be spent responsibly, accountably, and effectively, even if sometimes outside of the public's direct gaze. In fact, given that counter-terrorism spending is sometimes quite secretive, often expensive, and occasionally a matter of life and death, creating an evidence base to gauge effectiveness is arguably *more* important here than with any other public service.

However, stopping a problem before it arises always poses ethical and practical questions; in counter-terrorism, it involves sensitive issues of theology, integration, identity, and the legitimate purview of the state. Pathways to terrorism are varied, complicated, and unpredictable, and it is difficult to pinpoint where and when "prevention" should take place. Indeed, linear, mono-explanatory models of the journey into terrorism have been widely criticized by several leading experts. Our research at the think tank Demos suggests that, for at least some home-

grown terrorists, the move from extremism to terrorism is extremely quick, and is partly driven by excitement about the idea of violent activity as much as being a natural evolution from an extreme group or ideology.[2]

This makes it very difficult to know what to measure. Good prevention work could be aiming at a very wide range of things, including attitudes — such as general support for terrorist activity — and behaviours — such as encouraging communities to share information with law enforcement agencies if they spot it, or stimulating or helping communities to work to combat radicalization directly. Other more specific aims might include targeted de-radicalisation of certain individuals, or encouraging them to disengagement. (John Horgan's landmark work on the subject found that most "reformed" terrorists had disengaged, but could not be said to have "de-radicalized").[3] Even if you know what to measure, robustly measuring change caused by any single government intervention is difficult because these kinds of causal associations are strewn with "confounding variables." In short — a lot of other things going on also affect any measured outcome. Ultimately, the most important successful outcome of prevention is that something *doesn't* happen. Measuring its success is often therefore a matter of counter-factuals: the "what ifs" that cloud around something that did not happen, but would, or might, without an intervention.

These sorts of problems are usually, and best, confronted with careful, peer reviewed, and open academic work. This leads to the often painstaking ensconcing of any measurement, any finding, in the caveats, finesses, and qualifications that make them helpful. In sensitive prevention work, this is not always possible.

Thus: measuring the success of prevention work is essential, it is extremely difficult, and cannot always be widely published. Taken together, we believe this creates something we call "the measurement paradox." This paradox leads to an important pitfall. Following a terrorist attack, successful, botched or foiled, there is usually a surge in public interest and support for counter-terrorism measures and spending. Paradoxically though, the better the prevention work, the greater likelihood that support for, and interest in, will decline. In some ways they are like sporting referees: no-one ever notices the best ones. We speculate that the evolution of the terrorist threat — such as increasing cyber security — could make this pitfall even more dangerous. At its most serious it could lessen public understanding of and support for the very measures needed to keep us safe.

So what to do when faced with this paradox? It would be hubristic to claim to have answered this question. But in our view some recognitions are important, and some measures can help.

First, it is important to recognize there is no one single way to measure prevention work — certainly not at meta-level. Some very specific prevention activities, such as very targeted police and community-led interventions are more amendable to measurement than others, such as general community-building initiatives. The cost of evaluation must also be considered: there is little point in undertaking a large population level longitudinal survey, testing every possible variable in search of a statistically significant improvement in community level attitudes following a small localized project. Sometimes basic output measures — "was the money spent in the way proposed?" — might be enough.

Second, there are new ways to measure. Other fields, such as advertising and marketing, confront the same need to understand attitudinal changes in order to measure their equivalent of policy effectiveness, "ROI" — return on investment. They have increasingly turned to the emerging field of social media analysis. The explosion of social media has created digital-social worlds that are more measureable and quantifiable than any other; they are, simply, the largest constantly refreshing evidence base of human attitudes we have ever created. Harnessing this new data can help understand how far government interventions have reached the public, or how the public responds in real time to a counter-terrorism operation, but as we argued in a recent paper, "Intelligence," there is still much work to do to turn broad metric measurements on social media — or "SOCMINT, social media intelligence" — into something valid and useful.[4]

Third, an important reason that we create evidence bases for policies is to establish legitimacy and accountability for the taxpayer. Any evaluation of counter-terrorism must be communicated in a way that makes sense to, and commands confidence from, the governed. That means the work of security and intelligence services overall must be independently reviewed — including prevention work — and results made public as far as possible, redacted where necessary. In the UK, this is done by the Intelligence and Security Committee, comprised of security cleared Members of Parliament. But equally, these organs of oversight and communication must be trusted. In a context of low levels of institutional trust, we believe there is scope for making the public more directly involved in this process: security cleared members of the public involved in an auditing role looking at security service spending, overall use of powers. Similarly, direct public communications are a good thing on the whole — and are important to raise understanding and awareness of the threat, its scale and severity, and the work being undertaken to counter it. The current UK Terrorism Threat Levels struggles with the twin imperatives of open

government and operational discretion. It is hard to know what to make of an announcement that, as happened in July 2011, the threat, then "substantial" rather than "severe," meant that an attack was no longer "highly likely" but only "a strong possibility." Divulging some of the measures that underlie these judgments would be simplest: the number of successful terrorist attacks, how that number was arrived at; investigations carried out; the arrests; and intelligence used in prosecutions. Some countries do this, others do not. In Denmark, intelligence agencies publish an unclassified assessment of their judgment of the threats facing the country. The release of Joint Intelligence Committee assessments should be regularized, codified, de-politicized, and made widely available.

Overall, measuring counter-terrorism effectiveness will always remain vital, difficult to do, and difficult to communicate. It is an inexact science, and will remain so. It is acceptable to live with some imprecision — provided that guiding imperatives remain a desire to publicly evidence efforts as far as possible, and ensure the understanding and consent of the governed.

NOTES

[1] Charles, Farr. [26 February 2009] Home Affairs Sub-Committee: Evidence in response to Q171.

[2] McCauley, C. & Moskalenko, S. [2008] 'Mechanisms of Political Radicalisation', Terrorism and Political Violence, 20(3); Bartlett, J., Birdwell, J & King, M, *The Edge of Violence*: (London: Demos, 2011).

[3] Horgan, J. Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of disengagement from radical and extremist movements (London: Routledge, 2009).

[4] Omand, D., Bartlett, J. & Miller, C. *Intelligence* (London: Demos, 2012).