

“Conveying Complex Uncertainty – The Dilemmas of Communicating about Terror Threats”

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Abstract

Despite the abundance of current research on topics related to terrorism and counterterrorism, contributions focussing on the fundamentals of “authorities-to-citizen” communication are largely missing. In my dissertation, I investigate the complex uncertainty inherent in public terror threat communication in Norway. I demonstrate that it is not a given that the public are made aware of looming terror threats, and that when it does happen, the rationale, motivation and justification by the authorities is multifaceted, dynamic and context dependent. I argue that terror threats are partly constructed via the communication from the authorities, and that the way this information is crafted and conveyed to the public comes with both opportunities and obstacles. Because this communication can have multiple different outcomes and effects on society, authorities are faced with several dilemmas when choosing how and what to communicate. The overarching research question is therefore: Which dilemmas do Norwegian authorities face when deciding if, how and when to inform the public about potential terror threats, and how do they respond to those dilemmas?

To answer the question, I have studied what I conceptualize as terror threat communication outputs. The empirical base consists mainly of the unclassified national terror threat assessments issued by the Norwegian Police Security Service (PST) and the Intelligence Service of the Norwegian Armed forces (NIS) between 2004-2022. In addition, in-depth elite interviews were conducted at both services. The management of external communication in the three major terror situations known to the public in Norway over the past decade is also examined.

The Norwegian case study is placed within larger theoretical debates (e.g., constructivism, science and technology studies (STS), performativity, and the notion of the risk/ threat society) and aims at contributing to making a connection between an academic definition of threats as a specification of risk, and the work of the authorities and the communication practitioners. In sum, I find that the study of threat communication is inevitably the study of how counter-terrorism policy shapes society. I indicate that the communication challenges cannot, and should not, be reduced to legal reflections on the need for transparency, accountability, and mechanisms of democratic oversight. Rather, I identify a set of dilemmas that clarify the fact that such normative reflections are much less evident than what is often assumed or admitted; communicating terrorist threats goes much further than simply fulfilling a moral democratic obligation to inform the public about potential threats.

I argue that “the truth does not convey itself”; and that a democratic counterterrorism policy requires a thorough analysis and better appreciation of the complexities of terror threat communication, and of several core dilemmas in particular. Finally, I suggest that for the academic debates on threat communication to have an impact on practice, qualitative insight into how the communication work is carried out and understood by the practitioners themselves in the contexts of other national government agencies is needed.