



Evaluating the Effectiveness of Public Communication Campaigns and Their Implications for Strategic Competition with Russia

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The authors examine evidence on the effectiveness of campaigns to influence public opinion in target populations—sometimes referred to as “information warfare”—in the context of strategic competition between the United States and Russia, and they provide recommendations for how the United States can maximize the effectiveness of its public communications in competition with Russia.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How effective are campaigns to influence public opinion on issues related to politics, policy, political participation, and political loyalty?
- Which factors regarding these campaigns, their audiences, or their contexts help to determine their effectiveness?
- What are the implications of these studies for the United States’ strategy for and conduct of such operations in competition with Russia?



KEY FINDINGS

- The most effective campaigns are face-to-face, repeated campaigns. Such campaigns generally have a larger average impact on persuasion, knowledge, and behavior than ones conducted through television or the internet.
- Negative and positive messages appear to be almost equally effective in motivating behavioral change. Negative messaging does seem to be more memorable than other types of messages, but they can also lead to backlash against the sender.
- Targeting a message to a particular subpopulation greatly increases the success rate of information campaigns, especially if the targeting stresses peer groups or community norms.
- In complex environments where people are bombarded by a wide range of messages, adversarial messaging efforts tend to cancel each other out.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- The United States should undertake vigorous campaigns to reinforce the resilience of Western political institutions and norms. Communication campaigns such as those Russia is pursuing are more effective where they are not contested or countered by alternatives.
- The United States should target messaging campaigns precisely, based on in-depth analysis of target subpopulations.
- The United States should commit to long-running campaigns stressing consistent themes.
- The United States should work through local actors and employ face-to-face campaigns when possible.
- The United States should invest in effective evaluation of its communication campaigns.
- The United States should resist the urge to engage in tit-for-tat “information warfare” with Russia. Russian vulnerabilities are different than those of the United States, and competition strategies designed to impose costs on Russia should recognize this fact.