

February 2024

Testing to see if an awareness messaging campaign about ‘social bads’ will actually work: why experimental techniques are best¹

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Summary

Policy strategies aimed at controlling or fighting so-called ‘social bads’ like corruption and organised crime often contain an awareness raising or strategic communications element. These generally aim to inform the public about the issue in the hope of changing how people think and hence how they act. A growing body of evidence demonstrates that these campaigns often have little effect and, in some cases, may even backfire, making the situation worse. This Briefing Note explains why this is the case and what can be done about it in order to enable policy makers to maximise impact and value for money. It argues that the disappointing performance of many awareness raising messages means that policy makers should follow the “three T’s” before launching any public relations campaigns in this area, carefully *tailoring*, *targeting* and *testing* messages using experimental techniques.

1 For the full research paper see Cheeseman, N. and Peiffer, C. 2022. “Can messaging help us fight serious organised crime and corruption in Albania?”. SOC ACE Research Paper No. 2. Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham (<https://www.socace-research.org.uk/publications/messaging-soc-albania-rp2>).

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Background

Policy strategies aimed at controlling or fighting so-called 'social bads' like corruption and organised crime often contain an awareness raising or strategic communications element. These campaigns try to educate or change how the public thinks about an issue, build a base of support for change and sometimes have a call to action. In practice, the effectiveness of a messaging campaign is often assessed by its 'reach', which speaks to an implicit assumption that the campaign will have the intended impacts as long as enough people are exposed to it.

A growing body of recent research, however, suggests that many messaging campaigns about 'social bads' are more likely to have little to no impact at all, or even do more harm than good, than to work as intended. One fear is that, in raising awareness to the problem, messaging unintentionally makes the 'social bad' seem to be more socially acceptable. Another is that it could simply reinforce pre-existing beliefs that the problem is too big to solve. Additionally, the effects of messaging campaigns have been found to depend heavily on who is receiving the message, suggesting that practitioners need to target messaging to specific audiences. This raises an important question: how can policy makers maximise impact and value for money when countering social bads with messaging.

The need to test messages

The risk of deploying awareness raising messages without prior testing is well demonstrated by the research on messaging on corruption, a classic 'social bad' that policy makers have sought to tackle around the world for decades. As Table 1 demonstrates, so far nine studies have been conducted that have tested 19 anti-corruption messages. So far, only two messages have been found to have the desired effect, i.e., they encouraged individuals to refuse bribes, report corruption, or support anti-corruption efforts in some other way. Far more messages (seven) were found to have no effect on key outcomes. Most worrying of all, ten messages backfired and generated a negative effect of some kind. In our own study of anti-corruption messages in Lagos, Nigeria, for example, we found that even positive messages designed to stress government progress or the support of religious leaders for clean governance initiatives increasing the likelihood that individuals would pay a bribe in a "bribery game" played with real money.⁴ In these cases, messages may not only represent poor value for money, but can actually make the situation worse.

⁴ For more information, see Cheeseman, N. and Peiffer, C., 2022. 'The curse of good intentions: Why anticorruption messaging can encourage bribery. *American Political Science Review*, 116(3), pp.1081-1095.

Table 1. Anti-corruption messaging literature finds most messages counterproductive (red) or ineffective (amber). Few worked as intended (green)

Study	Location	Themes of message(s) tested
Corbacho et al. ⁵	Costa Rica	Increasing rate of bribery in country*
Peiffer ⁶	Jakarta	Grand corruption is endemic*
		Petty corruption is endemic*
		Government successes in anti-corruption*
		Citizens can get involved in anti-corruption*
Peiffer and Walton ⁷	Port Moresby	Corruption is endemic**
		Corruption is illegal**
		Corruption is against religious teachings**
		Corruption is a ‘local’ issue***
Kobis et al. ⁸	Manguzi	Bribery declined recently in region
Cheeseman and Peiffer ⁹	Lagos	Corruption is endemic*
		Government successes in anti-corruption*
		Corruption is against religious teachings*
		Corruption steals tax money*
		Corruption is a ‘local’ issue*
Agerberg ¹⁰	Mexico	Citizens strongly condemn corruption***
Cheeseman and Peiffer ¹¹	Albania	Corruption is endemic**
		Citizens strongly condemn corruption**
		Wealth is lost to other countries**

Note: *Red: at least one unwanted effect; **Amber: no impact/largely no impact across outcomes; ***Green: clear intended impact

Literature on other social bads, including gender-based violence, the protection of endangered environments and compliance with COVID-19 restrictions, tell a similar story.¹² Across all these diverse issue areas, researchers have found that

awareness raising messages can have unwanted effects by explicitly or implicitly telling people that unwanted behaviours are widespread. This is dangerous because it signals that although they may be against the formal rules, problematic

- 5 Corbacho, A., Gingerich, D.W., Oliveros, V. and Ruiz-Vega, M., 2016. “Corruption as a self-fulfilling prophecy: Evidence from a survey experiment in Costa Rica.” *American Journal of Political Science*, 60(4), pp.1077-1092.
- 6 Peiffer, C. 2017. “Getting the message: examining the intended – and unintended – impacts of corruption awareness-raising.” Birmingham, UK: Developmental Leadership Program (<https://www.dlprog.org/publications/research-papers/getting-the-message-examining-the-intended-and-unintended-impacts-of-corruption-awareness-raising>); Peiffer, C. 2018. “Message received? Experimental findings on how messages about corruption shape perceptions.” *British Journal of Political Science*, 50(3), pp.1207-1215.
- 7 Peiffer, C. and Walton, G.W. 2022. “Getting the (right) message across: How to encourage citizens to report corruption.” *Development Policy Review*, 40(5), p. e12621.
- 8 Köbis, N.C., Troost, M., Brandt, C.O. and Soraperra, I. 2019. “Social norms of corruption in the field: social nudges on posters can help to reduce bribery.” *Behavioural Public Policy*, 6(4), pp.597-624.
- 9 Cheeseman, N. and Peiffer, C. 2021. “The curse of good intentions: Why anticorruption messaging can encourage bribery.” *American Political Science Review*, 116(3), pp.1081-1095; Cheeseman, N. and Peiffer, C. 2023. “Why efforts to fight corruption can undermine the social contract: Lessons from a survey experiment in Nigeria.” *Governance*, 36(4), pp. 1045-1061.
- 10 Agerberg, M. 2022. “Messaging about corruption: The power of social norms.” *Governance*, 35(3), pp.929-950.
- 11 Cheeseman, N. and Peiffer, C. 2022. “Can messaging help us to fight SOC and corruption in Albania?” SOC ACE Research Paper No. 2, Birmingham: University of Birmingham.
- 12 As summarised in *ibid*.

practices – such as paying a bribe – are in fact socially acceptable. Because our own perceptions of what we should do are powerfully shaped by what we think our peers are doing, hearing that people like us are behaving in the “wrong” way can actually encourage us – often subconsciously – to do the same. This helps to explain why some anti-corruption messages have been found to encourage bribe payment, and why exposure to a message that referred to problematic gender stereotypes made men believe that domestic violence is a “less serious problem”.¹³

While the risks associated with awareness raising and strategic communications about 'social bads' are becoming clearer, there remains good reason not to give up on them, however. Under-acknowledging major social problems may give implicit license to a status quo that facilitates them, and there is still an indication that some messages may work when tailored and targeted effectively. We therefore need to find ways to test messages, to see which are effective and for whom. Time and resources should be dedicated to testing after the design of messaging strategies, but before they are deployed. Given the large amounts of time and money spent on awareness raising and other forms of strategic communications every year, the small investment required to test the efficacy and impact of messages represents excellent value for money, especially considering the risk that such campaigns could backfire.

Why focus groups and interviews can be misleading

Anecdotal evidence suggests that many, if not most 'social bads' messaging campaigns are not tested, and that those that do, often use focus groups or even semi-structured interviews to gauge reactions. However, testing messages designed around 'social bads' should not rely exclusively on these methods for a number of reasons:

- Participants may feel pressure to give researchers answers that participants think they want to hear, rather than report how they truly feel about a message.
- Both focus groups and interviews can take a lot of time but do not involve a lot of participants, making it impossible to know if the feedback gathered with respect to a message is representative of the ultimate target audience.
- In focus groups, specifically, the conversation can also be greatly affected by the dynamic of the group (e.g., if one person dominates the discussion), making it difficult to know how all individuals in the group respond to a message.
- Perhaps most importantly, messaging about 'social-bads' very likely impacts on attitudes subconsciously, and so individuals may not be fully aware of the true impact that a message is having and, as a result, could mis-represent the impacts of messaging in a focus group or interview without meaning to.

Why experimental techniques are more reliable

Using experimental techniques is a better approach for testing because they can provide a systematic estimate of the effect of exposure to messages. This strategy considerably reduces the risk of false reporting by individuals, as participants are never asked what a given message made them think or feel. Rather, this information is gained through a scientific approach that systematically measures the impact of exposure to a message on relevant attitudes and beliefs.

Household level population-based survey experiments (PBSE), in particular, can be incredibly useful in testing awareness raising or other strategic communication messaging.

13 Keller, S., Wilkinson, T. and Otjen, A.J. 2010. "Unintended Effects of a Domestic Violence Campaign." *Journal of Advertising* 39 (4), pp. 53–68.

A PBSE is a research design that is contained within a survey and is administered directly to households on the basis of a sample of the population that a campaign hopes to eventually

reach. Because a representative sample is used, the results more accurately reflect the likely impact of the real intervention. This methodology contains four important steps:



1. Choosing a representative sample

A strategy is used for surveying a sample of participants that is representative of the total population that a messaging campaign hopes to reach. For example, an established census-based sampling protocol can be used to guide such a strategy.



2. Randomisation and exposure

Participants are randomly assigned to at least two groups. One group receives no message at all (control group), and the other group is exposed to a message about a social bad (treatment group).



3. Survey to gauge impacts

All participants answer the same survey questions. These survey questions gauge the potential impacts of messaging that the test is interested in assessing.



4. Analysis

Simple statistical analyses are used to find out whether those in the treatment group tended to answer the survey questions differently to those in the control group. Analyses can also assess if a message is more/less impactful with certain groups.

There are three main advantages to using a PBSE for 'social bads' message testing.

- First, a PBSE may be best placed to elicit honest feedback. Individuals know what the "right answer" is on questions about a 'social bad' and can be less likely to talk openly about these issues in a focus group setting. A survey experiment is more subtle, as participants are not told that the researcher is interested in how they respond to a message until the end. By

testing how people think more indirectly, survey experiments promise to generate more accurate findings. Moreover, a PBSE can be conducted in people's homes, and so participations are more likely to feel comfortable about answering potentially sensitive survey questions honestly, than in an artificial setting such as within a focus group or the kinds of studies that ask people to travel to a "research laboratory" to take part in the study.

- Second, a PBSE is more flexible to examining many potential impacts of messaging. A PBSE can easily test multiple messages at once and the results will indicate which message is the most effective to choose to deploy in a campaign. Similarly, the results of a PBSE can be used to identify whether a message works well for some and doesn't for others. Analyses can be made within sub-populations, or groups (like young adults, women, a specific region), the findings of which can help inform how and to whom messaging campaigns should be targeted.
- Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the results of a PBSE indicate clearly whether exposure to a message *caused* a specific reaction. This is because in randomly assigning participants to groups, and making sure that there are no significant variations between the groups in terms of their composition, analyses can confidently conclude that the only thing that could have caused different responses to survey question between groups is whether they were exposed to a message or not. By comparison, causality is impossible to pin down in focus groups, as people can be influenced by the input of other focus group members.

Conclusion: The importance of the three T's

In summary, the evidence so far suggests that policy makers using awareness raising messages should follow what we call the three T's: *tailoring, targeting and testing messages*.

Tailoring and targeting are important because the evidence shows that messaging is likely to have different effects on different audiences and that blanket campaigns are likely to be particularly unimpactful and even risk backfiring. Their design, therefore, must be tailored to their intended audience and their deployment targeted to that audience as well. Testing plays

an especially critical role in supporting both of these efforts. Tests are needed to see whether messaging has been effectively tailored and targeted, and having the intended impacts, ensuring that no harm is being done and that the campaign represents sound value for money.

Those interested in more information and discussing how specific messages can be tested are encouraged to contact the authors for more information.

Suggested Reading

C. Peiffer & N. Cheeseman (2023) *Message misunderstood: why raising awareness of corruption can backfire*. U4 Brief 2023:1, available at <https://www.u4.no/publications/message-misunderstood-why-raising-awareness-of-corruption-can-backfire.pdf>.

Cheeseman, N. and Peiffer, C., 2022. The curse of good intentions: Why anticorruption messaging can encourage bribery. *American Political Science Review*, 116(3), pp.1081-1095, at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/curse-of-good-intentions-why-anticorruption-messaging-can-encourage-bribery/CE180F511D68B5A4D14904ACFA3728F4>

Cheeseman, N. and Peiffer, C., 2022. Can messaging help in fighting serious organised crime (SOC) and corruption in Albania?, at: <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents/college-social-sciences/government-society/publications/can-messaging-help-in-fighting-serious-organised-crime-soc-and-corruption-in-albania-briefing.pdf>

Sanderson B. (2018) How to test your communications. Public Interest Research Centre and ILGA-Europe. Available: [Testing Guide – PIRC \(publicinterest.org.uk\)](https://www.publicinterest.org.uk/testing-guide)

The Serious Organised Crime & Anti-Corruption Evidence (SOC ACE) research programme aims to help 'unlock the black box of political will' for tackling serious organised crime, illicit finance and transnational corruption through research that informs politically feasible, technically sound interventions and strategies. Funded by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), SOC ACE is a new component in the Anti-Corruption Evidence (ACE) research programme, alongside Global Integrity ACE and SOAS ACE. SOC ACE is managed by the University of Birmingham, working in collaboration with a number of leading research organisations and through consultation and engagement with key stakeholders.

SOC ACE is funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth, & Development Office. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the UK Government's official policies.

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