

Nov 04, 2016 by Philip Seib

Public Diplomacy and Counterterrorism ^[1]

DUBLIN --- At a small but intense conference organized by Dublin City University last week, about 120 terrorism and media experts gathered to consider how terrorists use the Internet and other new media, and to ponder ways to counter their efforts.

Even to those of us who work in this field, the breadth and growth of extremist media activity is striking, with new ventures popping up constantly. Among the most recent is an online “news” channel, Al-Kataib, produced by Somalia’s Al Shabab. The channel’s motto is, “To Inform, To Inspire, To Incite,” and its first report was a well-produced seven-minute video titled “Mogadishu: The Crusaders’ Graveyard,” with the dead body of (purportedly) a UN soldier as its centerpiece.

This online genre features training and recruiting material, including programming aimed at children and, increasingly, women. For those who gather information primarily by sitting in front of a computer screen in a cyber café, terrorists provide enticing fare, with video from combat zones backed up by martial music, and exhortations to join in holy war.

To address this threat – and it is, without doubt, a threat – a different strategy is required from that directed at Osama bin Laden and others at the top of the terrorism pyramid. Most of the people exposed to these media sources are “in play,” in the sense that they are not yet committed to violence or actively involved in extremist groups. Rather, they are angry about politics, unhappy about their economic situation, and are protective of their religion. Despite their frustrations, most might follow a nonviolent path if such is offered to them and if it seems likely to lead to an improvement in their lives.

So, rather than overly relying on drones and special ops, which are appropriate only for the top levels of the pyramid, counterterrorism should be broadened to take advantage of the assets of public diplomacy. By reaching those at the base of the pyramid before they are radicalized to the point of violence, public diplomacy efforts could reduce the appeal of terrorists’ propaganda. This will require a rethinking of public diplomacy strategy, with less emphasis on “love us” public relations efforts and more on projects that directly shape individuals’ thinking and affect their lives.

This should incorporate a range of public diplomacy activities, including a significant expansion of current digital engagement projects in which constructive voices participate in Internet discussion forums and influence the tone and substance of online rhetoric. More important will be initiatives that target specific needs, ranging from job training to water supply, which will more closely link public diplomacy and aid programs.

By the end of the Dublin conference, participants had encountered few “Eureka!” moments, but I was encouraged by the increasing sophistication of the overview of counterterrorism. The participants seemed to recognize that terrorism can be countered before violent radicalization occurs and before lethal force becomes necessary. Public diplomacy can be an

important part of this.
