

CPD PERSPECTIVES ON PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Paper 2, 2011

Public Diplomacy, New Media, and Counterterrorism

By Philip Seib

La Diplomatie Publique

الدبلوماسية العامة

Общественная дипломатия

Public Diplomacy

PUBLICZNA DYPLOMACJA

הסברה

Publieksdiplomatie

Diplomacia Pública

公共外交

Δημόσια Διπλωματία

Публична дипломация

**Public Diplomacy, New Media, and
Counterterrorism**

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**March 2011
Figueroa Press
Los Angeles**

Public Diplomacy, New Media, and Counterterrorism

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Published by
FIGUEROA PRESS
840 Childs Way, 3rd Floor
Los Angeles, CA 90089
Phone: (213) 743-4800
Fax: (213) 743-4804
www.figueroapress.com

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ISBN 13: 978-1-932800-81-4

ISBN 10: 1-932800-81-6

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CPD Perspectives on Public Diplomacy

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Introduction

Public diplomacy tends to be underrated as a counterterrorism tool. As a preventive measure, it offers an alternative to military or police force because it seeks to reduce the level of enmity between those who might commit such acts and their potential victims.

Dealing with terrorism tends to be left primarily to exponents of hard power. That approach makes sense in some instances, but defeating terrorism will require more complex and carefully crafted measures that address the mass publics from which terrorists draw their recruits and support. These publics may be exposed to increasingly sophisticated media messages from terrorist groups, and such messages must be countered.

Public diplomacy should be at the heart of such efforts. This paper addresses how governments—particularly the government of the United States—have approached this task since the attacks on New York and Washington in 2001, and why some methods have been more successful than others. It also examines successful non-governmental programs that offer best practices examples that governments might adopt.

Among the issues and strategies worth examining are the role of international broadcasting, use of new media technologies, the roles of virtual states and diasporic populations, and the importance of linking public diplomacy efforts to specific policy initiatives. Terrorists' use of soft power is also analyzed.

Considering public diplomacy

To begin, let's settle on a simple—perhaps too simple—definition of public diplomacy: “that element of diplomacy that involves a government reaching out to a public, rather than to another government.” A more complete definition recognizes that it need not be a “government” that reaches out. Multinational organizations, NGOs, corporations, and the like may do so as well.

Not only do governments possess this tool of public diplomacy, but publics expect them to use it. To varying degrees, people feel intellectually and politically liberated by the technologies that enable them to be part of the larger world. A nation that does not reach out through public diplomacy today will not be considered a global leader, and it will not be adequately serving its own international interests.

The need for greater attention to public diplomacy is partly a function of globalized communication, which has sharpened the points at which policy and public meet. Proliferation of satellite television and the Internet means that people know more and know it faster than at any previous time. This can produce quick explosions, such as during the Danish cartoon controversy of 2006, and it has increased volatility among the denizens of “the Arab streets,” “the Chinese streets,” and other publics. (The use of the plural is important. In few if any cultures is there a single public “street.”) This restiveness affects domestic politics in these countries and complicates the tasks of diplomacy.

Less dependent on government-tied media for information, publics search for information on their own and must be courted directly rather than exclusively through their governments. This courtship is also important because a government concerned that a large part of its population is antagonistic toward the United

States, for example, may be reluctant to cooperate with U.S. policy. Polling results from the Middle East reported during summer 2010 by University of Maryland scholar Shibley Telhami underscore the dire situation in which the United States finds itself. Even where there is no anger, there is virtually no respect. Demonstrations of military might won't fix this. Public diplomacy, coupled with sound, enlightened policy, is the most logical way to help reduce this problem.

The "public" to which public diplomacy is directed is vast, curious, and less inhibited about challenging the information they are given. We have moved from an "authority-driven" to an "experience-driven" world. Rising availability of information has led to unprecedented personal independence in much of the world.

For public diplomacy practitioners, new media realities change the nature of their work. The days of stately diplomatic process are long gone, and a public diplomacy initiative that lags too far behind the media flow may be ineffective. Transparency, long considered annoying and even dangerous by many diplomats, is increasingly expected by information consumers and can be driven by YouTube, Twitter, and other social media. As technological divides narrow, more of the world knows more about what is going on. The diplomatic pouch has given way to the BBC, CNN, and Al Jazeera, and, more recently, CCTV, Russia Today, and other international satellite channels. The field is further crowded by social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. This means that when policy determinations are made, the world may learn about them within minutes from a variety of sources that may feature a variety of slants on the information. To meet this wave of information, a parallel public diplomacy plan must be ready for implementation, which means public diplomats must participate fully in the policy making process.

In addition to quickness, public diplomacy requires imagination in devising ways to capture the attention of global publics. Advancing women's rights, facilitating microcredit programs, championing environmental protection, upgrading public health and public education, and more such ventures are essential in meeting the needs of the publics that a country wishes to influence.

Public diplomacy as counterterrorism tool

Those who dismiss public diplomacy as a sideshow are correct if public diplomacy efforts have little purpose beyond the image construction, or "branding." But an argument can be made that public diplomacy has larger roles, including as a valuable counterterrorism tool.

Envision terrorism as a pyramid. At the tip are Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and a relatively small number of others who will never turn aside from the path of violence and must be dealt with accordingly. But as we move toward the base of the pyramid, the numbers grow larger and the commitment to violence lessens. Here are the people—many of them young—who can still be reached.

They are certainly being reached by Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. Malcolm Nance wrote that "Al Qaeda's pioneering use of viral video on platforms such as YouTube and Facebook and Web forums made [their] operations attractive to their target audience: young Arab men and women looking for a more pious way to resolve the injustices to the Muslim world."¹

Drop into a cyber café in Tangier or Amman and you are sure to find some 15-year-old boys watching videos showing American soldiers being killed while a stirring martial soundtrack plays and alluring promises are made to those who would join the fight. Or they might be viewing the newest mujahideen "news" channel, Al-

Kataib, launched in summer 2010 by Al Shabab of Somalia. The channel's motto is, "To Inform, To Inspire, To Incite." Its first video offering was "Mogadishu: The Crusaders' Graveyard," a smoothly produced, seven-minute video excoriating the United Nations military presence in that city and offering numerous shots of a burned body purportedly of a UN soldier. The on-camera "reporter" spoke fluent English.

One of the essential tasks of public diplomacy is to provide counterprogramming to offset the messages of proponents of hatred and violence. Establishing dialogue that involves peers, respected leaders, moderate clerics, and others is part of this. But an argument is convincing only if it is backed up by policy that can ensure that the promises made in such dialogue become reality. This underscores the importance of bringing public diplomacy into the heart of foreign policy, not leaving it as a satellite in distant orbit, glimpsed only occasionally.

As new media have fostered exponentially expanded information flows and pervasive interactive communication, public diplomacy's importance has increased.² Superpowers do it, small states do it, NGOs do it, corporations do it, and so do quasi-states such as Al Qaeda. A striking example of Al Qaeda's public diplomacy was Aymen al-Zawahiri's online "open meeting" in 2008, during which he responded to questions selected from nearly 2,000 submitted through the al-Ikhlas and al-Hesbah Web sites. The responses were presented in a one hour, forty-three minute audio statement, with Arabic and English transcripts, released by Al Qaeda's As-Sahab media production company.

The exercise was apparently a response by the Al Qaeda leaders to their deteriorating standing within the base of the "pyramid" described above. Zawahiri ignored the most frequently asked questions, which were about the dynamics of Al Qaeda's leadership,

and instead focused on political competitors, principally Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood (although the latter was mentioned in only 1 percent of the questions).³ Nevertheless, this outreach was notable for its creating at least the appearance of accessibility and accountability. The mystique of remoteness wears thin after a while, particularly when the competition—such as Hamas—is so much a part of public life.

The Al Qaeda leaders also may have recognized that they had fallen behind the pace of technology development. Daniel Kimmage, an analyst at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty wrote that originally, “the genius of Al Qaeda was to combine real-world mayhem with virtual marketing.” But now, added Kimmage, “a more interactive, empowered online community, particularly in the Arab-Islamic world, may prove to be Al Qaeda’s Achilles’s heel. Anonymity and accessibility, the hallmarks of Web 1.0, provided an ideal platform for Al Qaeda’s radical demagoguery. Social networking, the emerging hallmark of Web 2.0, can unite a fragmented silent majority and help it find its voice in the face of thuggish opponents, whether they are repressive rulers or extremist Islamic movements.”⁴

While Al Qaeda tries to adapt to the changes in the online world, counterterrorism agencies are also working to keep pace with technology. In Britain, the Research, Information, and Communication Unit (RICU), which is based in the Home Office, produced a report, “Challenging Violent Extremist Ideology through Communications,” calling for a two-part strategy: “channeling [anti-Al Qaeda] messages through volunteers in Internet forums” and providing the BBC and other media organizations around the world with propaganda designed to “taint the Al Qaeda brand.”⁵

The RICU report called for targeting the “Al Qaeda narrative,” which it said “combines fact, fiction, emotion, and religion and manipulates discontent about local and international issues. The

narrative is simple, flexible, and infinitely accommodating. It can be adapted to suit local conditions and may have a disproportionate influence on understanding and interpretation of local or global events.” Challenging this narrative, noted the report, would reduce the ability of terrorists to exploit the social grievances of the various publics Al Qaeda and other such groups count on for support. The report said, “The objective is not to dismiss ‘grievances’ but undermine Al Qaeda’s position as their champion and violent extremism as their solution.”⁶

This British strategy reflects recognition by counterterrorism planners that new and traditional media platforms must be used in loose combination to ensure comprehensive reach of their efforts. By being assertive, it also forces the hand of Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations that want to maintain their popular bases. Drawing the likes of Zawahiri into the (relative) open provides, at the very least, a chance for counterterrorism analysts to acquire information and insights about what the enemy is doing. Furthermore, the extremist narrative must be countered with an equally clear and appealing narrative that recognizes the strengths of the Al Qaeda brand.

More general public diplomacy programs are needed in addition to counterterrorism efforts. The United States has been notably unsuccessful in developing a comprehensive, first-rate public diplomacy strategy suitable for the environment of Web 2.0 (and beyond). U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said in 2007: “Public relations was invented in the United States, yet we are miserable at communicating to the rest of the world what we are about as a society and a culture, about freedom and democracy, about our policies and our goals. It is just plain embarrassing that al-Qaeda is better at communicating its message on the internet than America. As one foreign diplomat asked a couple of years ago, ‘How has one man in a cave managed to out-communicate the world’s greatest communication society?’ Speed, agility, and cultural

relevance are not terms that come readily to mind when discussing U.S. strategic communications.”⁷

Although the Obama administration promptly made high tech diplomacy more of a priority than it had been in previous years, these efforts have still suffered from bureaucratic resistance to technological change and problems of scale. This has limited the U.S. government’s ability to reach numerous audiences. Creative ventures, such as providing unfiltered “C-SPAN-type” news to the Muslim world and elsewhere exist but have failed to gain traction. Instead, Cold War theories hold sway, as can be seen in the largely archaic U.S. international broadcasting strategy, and so do remarkably unsophisticated views of most online efforts. Partly because of the public’s memories of terrorist attacks, the hard power approach is politically far easier to embrace than is a broader, more subtle strategy grounded in soft power.

Outside of governments, however, progress is happening. The Mideast Youth Foundation is one example and defines its work this way: “In a region where the freedom to explore freely and formulate informed opinions are greatly constrained and dissent is neither welcomed nor tolerated, the Internet has provided youth with an avenue to break through the barriers. Through utilizing the inherent powers of the Internet, MideastYouth.com built the region’s most diverse forum, where we challenge each other on a daily basis.... Governments no longer hold a monopoly over information; together we built an independent news outlet for the people and by the people.” Among the projects with which the foundation is involved is the March 18 Movement, which commemorates the day in 2009 when Omid Reza Mir Sayafi, Iranian blogger and journalist, died in Evin Prison in Tehran. The December before his death, he was sentenced to two and half years in prison for allegedly insulting religious leaders and engaging in “propaganda” against the Islamic Republic of Iran. “The March 18 Movement aims not only to make

sure that Omid Reza is remembered, but also that other persecuted bloggers around the world do not disappear into interrogation rooms and prison cells. The March 18 Movement would like to become a voice for bloggers everywhere who are in risk of being crushed under the heavy machinery of repression.”⁸

Other online voices discuss Facebook as a way to bring about digital democracy within non-democratic countries,⁹ and yet others anticipate greater Internet use once URLs in the Latin alphabet are often joined by those in Arabic, Chinese, and other alphabets. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other online venues offer opportunities to demystify “the other,” and if this can be done, some people who occupy the midsection and base of the terrorism pyramid might begin drifting away and into more constructive pursuits.

The importance of persistent efforts along these lines was underscored in November 2009 when 57 percent of voters in a Swiss referendum endorsed a ban on construction of new minarets (but not mosques themselves) anywhere in the country. About 400,000 Muslims live in Switzerland in what had been presumed to be a relatively well integrated society. The Economist observed that the Swiss voters supporting the minarets ban believe “that the world really does divide into Huntingtonian blocks, where one religion or another prevails, and the rest exist on sufferance.”¹⁰ In the United States, opposition to construction of an Islamic cultural center in New York City (near the World Trade Center site) and elsewhere gives credence to the “clash of civilizations” theory. Ignorance and fear can trump constitutional principles and common sense, and can give birth to hatred. The political turmoil accompanying this serves as evidence for Muslim extremists around the world that the enmity of the “Crusader” West is pervasive.

The Swiss vote, American protests, and political pressures on Islam elsewhere are evidence of the need for bridge-building. In

terms of creating intercultural connections, one of the most successful efforts comes from some of the best-known citizens of the world, the Muppets.

Sesame Street was born in the United States during the 1960s after studies showed that early childhood education was crucial to a child's later learning. Sesame Workshop, the program's creative home, has continued to grow, and by 2010 versions of the program were seen in more than 130 nations, with local coproduction taking place in 30 countries.

Co-production is what makes Sesame Street different from most American cultural products that reach international audiences. Rather than simply saying, "If it's good enough for Americans, it is certainly good enough for you," the co-productions rely on local talent that understands local cultural and political issues. The localized versions of Sesame Street feature characters addressing even the most sensitive topics. In South Africa, for example, where 11 percent of children are AIDS orphans, Takalani Sesame includes a Muppet who is an HIV-infected AIDS orphan and who demonstrates a vibrant and positive approach to dealing with HIV/AIDS issues.

One of Sesame Workshop's most ambitious ventures has been the Palestinian-produced version of Sesame Street, which evolved after Sesame Stories—showing segments created by Palestinian, Israeli, and Jordanian production teams—ran afoul of intifada-related politics. The wholly Palestinian Shara'a Simsim began production in 2006, and although all the show's content must be approved by Sesame Workshop, it addresses realities of Palestinian children's lives. UNICEF found that as of June 2007 children in nearly a third of Palestinian families were experiencing anxiety, phobia, or depression, coupled in many cases with poor nutrition and poor general health. The executive director of the Palestinian program, Daoud Kuttab, observed that young Palestinian boys are

particularly in need of positive messages, given the cultural pressures they face, and the program's content advisor, Dr. Cairo Arafat, said, "We want to show boys that they can enjoy life, share and participate without having to prove that they are tough and without reverting to violence." Kuttab added, "I would say 3-, 4-, 5-year olds —if we don't catch them at that early age, we do risk losing them to all kinds of propaganda, whether it's conservative, religious, or fundamentalist."¹¹

Sesame Workshop is careful to avoid direct references to the politics and conflict of the region, but the show teaches lessons grounded in real events. One storyline portrayed the Palestinian community working together to recover from a serious storm that had caused much destruction and loss. Although there were no military symbols to be seen, the story could easily be interpreted as representing the aftermath of the 2008-9 Israeli attacks on Gaza. Compare this to the episode of a program on Hamas's Al Aqsa channel in which a leading character of the show is portrayed as dying as a result of this conflict and inciting the program's young viewers to seek revenge against Israel.

The example of Shara'a Simsim is not just a "feel-good" story. It is an example of constructive pushback against the pressures young people feel that can nudge them toward violence. Hate-filled children's programming from Al Aqsa television and other sources cannot be allowed to stand unchallenged without increasing the risk of their viciousness taking hold in a generation that either can be the next recruiting ground for terrorists or can provide people who will work against violence.

Puppets (or Muppets) might not be the ultimate counterterrorism tool, but programming such as this can serve as a model for what might be a softer companion to anti-terrorism efforts and classified as "terrorism prevention." Using Sesame Workshop's creations as

a paradigm, similar work could be commissioned to meet particular needs in particular places. This will not be a cure-all; the child who is well-adjusted at age 5 could certainly embrace violence by age 16. But to do nothing to shape children's attitudes about cooperation and problem-solving would be to leave the door to violence open just a bit wider.

For young people and others, at no time should a vacuum be allowed to exist, because experience has shown that extremists will be quick to fill it with their messages. Further, merely reacting to extremist initiatives is insufficient; a proactive strategy that embraces innovative tactics is essential in dealing with foes whose own creativity has consistently been underestimated.

Selecting the media to use in such efforts should be determined by the audience's information consumption habits. In much of the Middle East, satellite television is the most popular medium. (Scan the urban landscape of a city such as Cairo and you'll see evidence of this in the many thousands of satellite dishes.) For large parts of the world, Internet use is increasing, but still trails far behind television. Another medium, in public use for almost a hundred years, is still dominant in areas of the world that are less wired and less connected. Radio still holds sway in countries such as Afghanistan, and, given the realities of global terrorism, radio's importance should not be ignored.

In Afghanistan, Mullah Fazlullah, also known as "Mullah Radio," has used an FM transmitter to threaten with beheading those who do not support the Taliban.¹² This is reminiscent of Rwanda's Radio Mille Collines, which contributed to the 1994 genocide by broadcasting a stream of hate-filled messages urging Hutus to kill Tutsis. The worst thing to do in such a case is to leave such radio broadcasts unanswered. In Afghanistan, Americans have worked with Afghans to prepare their own local-oriented programming—

an example of co-production—and given residents crank-powered radios so they can listen to the voices that are trying to drown out the Taliban’s exhortations.

The Taliban leaders do not limit themselves to radio. Apparently with coaching by Al Qaeda’s media experts, the Taliban have produced Web sites, electronic magazines, DVDs with combat scenes, and even downloadable Taliban ringtones.¹³ (The Taliban ringtones are non-musical, featuring instead passages from the Qur’an.) Even as they condemn modernism on religious grounds, the Taliban recognize the military and political necessity of using the media they claim to despise. In late 2009, Al Qaeda itself began its “Al-Ansar Mobile Team,” which uploads text, audio, and photographs for reception on mobile telephones.¹⁴

As was seen in the November 2008 terror attacks in Mumbai, perpetrators and victims alike rely on new media. The terrorists used the Internet in planning the strikes and in communicating with each other, and those caught up in the attacks used Twitter, mobile phone cameras, and other tools to report what was going on as it happened.

The examples are many. Mumbai, Bali, Madrid, London, Nairobi, New York—wherever terrorists have attacked or gained a foothold, the many facets of extremism have become inextricably linked to media technologies and networks. If the cyberworld is terrorists’ chosen terrain, that is where they must be fought.

The rise of the virtual state

Virtual states are real. That may seem a semantic contradiction, but virtual states are increasingly significant factors for foreign policy strategists who address issues ranging from public diplomacy to counterterrorism.

Virtual states exist on three levels:

- Recognized states whose politics are redefined because their diaspora enjoy technologically enhanced connections to the homeland;
- De facto nations whose borders and legitimacy are defined not by conventional maps and international law, but rather by new realities shaped by global communication platforms;
- Non-state actors such as terrorist organizations that use media-reliant networks to establish themselves as quasi-states.

In the first category, consider Pakistan. Is “Pakistan” the land mass northwest of India, as pictured on maps and with the borders recognized by international law? Or is it something more, an electronically connected global entity that includes the more than seven million members of the Pakistani diaspora? More than a million Pakistanis live in the United Kingdom, another million-plus in Saudi Arabia, almost a million in the United Arab Emirates, and sizable Pakistani communities exist in 20 other countries. Where do their interests and loyalties lie: with the Pakistan homeland, with the nation where they now reside, or do they float in statelessness? Or, as another alternative, do they see themselves as citizens of a virtual Pakistan in which members of the diaspora are fully included rather than being relegated to the second-tier status of expatriates?

Diasporic populations are nothing new, but what is new is the nature of easily available interactive communication that allows members of the diaspora to retain unprecedented ties to the homeland. Satellite television, websites, e-mail, Facebook, Twitter, mobile phones, and other such tools foster constant connection to the mother country.

By way of contrast, consider America during the early years of the 20th century. In 1907, about 100,000 immigrants were arriving in the United States each month. By 1910, 15 percent of the U.S. population was foreign-born. What differentiates that situation from today's immigration patterns around the world is that when those immigrants came to America, even if they clustered in communities of individual nationalities (such as "Little Italy" in New York), their ties to their homelands were tenuous, grounded mostly in memory. Communication with family and others in the old country was mostly by letters, which moved slowly, and even if elements of national heritage were maintained in their new homes, most immigrants were intent on becoming "Americans," and certainly determined that their children would do so.

Today, easily accessible communication tools encourage close ties to even the most distant former home, and so the situation is more complex. Do these connections to the homeland allow immigrants to relax, knowing they are not cut off from their past, and so they embrace smooth assimilation? Or do those high-tech ties lead them to see their new home as merely an extension of their traditional one and make assimilation unnecessary?

How such questions are answered should concern the governments of the immigrants' new homes, as the responses will influence attitudes about community-building and loyalty. The diasporic clusters that characterized cities such as New York a century ago were steppingstones toward new national identity. Today, those clusters may constitute long-term outposts of the immigrants' home countries, segments of the virtual state. Not just xenophobes worry about this presence in terms of security issues and complications arising if self-imposed separatism is chosen over integration. Today, the equivalent of the "Little Italy" of a century ago might remain more Italy than America, and today's "Londonistan" might be less a

melting pot than a balkanized array of settlements whose residents have no intention of becoming British.

In the past, fears about such matters, although often exaggerated, have led to internment during wartime and discrimination at other times. Even if an immigrant community's homeland is not officially an enemy, the presence of foreign nationals whose loyalties are to their previous home is at least disconcerting to those worried about encroaching foreign interests.

Ways exist, however, to work within virtual states to advance national self-interest. When public diplomacy strategies are being formulated, connecting with these diasporic populations must be part of the plan. To stay with Pakistan as an example, public diplomacy directed toward Pakistan needs to reach out to the dispersed communities of "virtual Pakistan" as well as to people living in the physical homeland. Messages to a Pakistani living in London are likely to reach Pakistanis living in South Asia, and vice versa, often very quickly. As the virtual state grows larger, its diasporic elements constitute important audiences in themselves, and public diplomacy messages should be tailored accordingly.

Failure to undertake this broadened communication ignores the influence that citizens of the remote parts of "virtual Pakistan" can have within the greater Pakistan. The messages may be delivered in any number of ways: on the Web, by broadcast, through cultural or exchange programs and science and health projects, and other public diplomacy venues. When targeting the virtual state audience, the multiplier effect is crucial. Anything online, for example, can be directly forwarded and its audience can expand exponentially within moments.

Citizens of a virtual state will not be homogeneous in their attitudes about particular issues or their general worldview. The Pakistani

banker in London presumably sees the world differently than does the Pakistani laborer in Riyadh, although they may share attitudes grounded in religion, national culture, and other fundamentals. Regardless of their differences, they are likely to have in common tools essential to citizenship in the virtual state: a mobile phone that allows them to talk or text with their fellow Pakistanis in Karachi or Toronto or Athens or anywhere else, or an Internet connection that fosters even greater connectivity.

This means a network exists that thoughtful public diplomacy planners can use to reach large audiences. Having multiple avenues is useful when delivering messages such as cautionary tales about the potential Talibanization of Pakistan. Those warnings may be amplified if they are sent not only directly to Pakistanis in the homeland but also are relayed by those in outlying parts of the virtual state. With their different perspectives on the issue, these constituencies may emphasize different elements of the message, but if the original argument is crafted and presented carefully, this spin can reinforce the essence of the anti-Taliban case. The network enhances the message.

Another example is that of U.S. public diplomacy related to Haiti and relief efforts after the January 2010 earthquake. In American public diplomacy efforts, the widespread Haitian diaspora was told, through broadcast and Internet-based media, about the substantial U.S. commitment to helping Haiti. (The 800,000 Haitians living in the United States could not be reached in this way. The archaic Smith-Mundt Act of 1948 prohibits official dissemination within the United States of U.S. government communication intended for foreign audiences. That the Internet makes this law pointless has not yet stirred Congress to repeal it. In this case a valuable audience was neglected.)

Reaching out to the global Haitian community in this instance was a matter of basic public diplomacy practice, and this case illustrates how important it is to define “Haiti” as more than the physical state in the Caribbean. Within Haiti, cellular telephone and Internet capabilities are minuscule. For outreach purposes, the diaspora is far easier to contact, with websites such as haitiandiaspora.com finding an audience among Haitians whose homes extend from the Dominican Republic to Western Europe. A key to reaching traditional Haiti is to do so through the country’s virtual components and let the information work its way to the homeland.

On a different level, virtual statehood can provide a degree of legitimacy and cohesion to quasi-states that might not have legal standing and may claim non-contiguous territory as part of a homeland. Kurdistan, for example, is not officially recognized as a country, but Kurds, who number 30 million and say they constitute the largest nation in the world without a state of their own, happily provide maps of a Kurdistan with pieces in Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and elsewhere. Although their constituencies are scattered, the Kurds use satellite television, radio, and numerous websites to link them and reinforce national identity even without there being, technically, a nation-state.

Not everyone approves of this. The Turkish government has allegedly exerted diplomatic pressure that has led to several Kurdish satellite television stations based in Europe being shut down. But new ones soon pop up, and Kurdish Internet content continues to expand. KurdishMedia.com states that it is designed to “define a state of ‘United Kurdistan’ as an isle of peace at the heart of the Middle East.” It provides news about Kurdish politics, Kurdish film festivals, and many more topics. Other websites offer essentials such as Kurdish matchmaking services and ringtones.

The Internet is particularly important to virtual states because it stimulates the interactive involvement essential to building a sense of community and establishing the “deep horizontal comradeship” cited by Benedict Anderson in his study of statehood. Without online connections, Kurds would be just a scattered, old-fashioned audience, able to glean information from television and radio, and able to speak to others individually on mobile phones, but remaining essentially passive and unable to develop the shared virtual terrain that the Internet makes accessible. Because those committed to developing the identity of Kurdistan have skillfully used the tools of new media, Kurdistan exists today as a virtual state, built on a platform of communications technology.

Virtual Pakistan and virtual Kurdistan are intriguing and prospectively constructive global players. But virtual states can also be malignant, as is the case with Al Qaeda. Unlike Pakistan and Kurdistan, which have physical presence from which their virtual states extend, Al Qaeda as organization/network/state exists primarily as a virtual body. Its “capital” may be in a Waziristan cave, but its constituent elements are widespread, constituting a dispersed global entity. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Al Qaeda in Iraq, and other affiliates, ranging from substantial groups to tiny cells around the world, are parts of the Al Qaeda virtual state.

The multiethnic Al Qaeda “citizenry” exists as such for a strategic purpose: to maintain a menacing capability to strike its enemies. Osama bin Laden has occasionally embraced the trappings of statehood, such as his 1996 “declaration of war” against the United States. It may inappropriately dignify a group of mass murderers to describe their collective presence as a virtual state, but bin Laden and his colleagues are wise in the ways of media and have built a far-flung enterprise that operates, however unwelcome it may be, in the arena of nations.

As a practical matter, viewing Al Qaeda as a virtual state might facilitate understanding its finances, its recruiting and training process, and how it might develop if bin Laden is killed or captured. Doing so might also bring some needed realism to counterterrorism strategy. The United States, among others, has consistently underestimated Al Qaeda's staying power and has, at least publicly, failed to recognize its willingness to wait patiently between launching major attacks. Not treating Al Qaeda with appropriate seriousness is dangerously foolhardy, and using the virtual state concept as a planning framework for counterterrorism efforts might help avoid this.

In addressing all these matters related to virtual states, policy makers must first be willing to break free from the dictates of conventional political geography and recognize the scope of the borderless virtual world. States have become more amorphous as their citizenry moves farther afield without truly separating from the homeland.

Toward an end of terrorism

Thomas Friedman has suggested that at contemporary terrorism's heart is an anti-American narrative that is "the cocktail of half-truths, propaganda, and outright lies about America that have taken hold in the Arab-Muslim world since 9/11. Propagated by jihadist Web sites, mosque preachers, Arab intellectuals, satellite news stations, and books—and tacitly endorsed by some Arab regimes—this narrative posits that America has declared war on Islam, as part of a grand 'American-Crusader-Zionist conspiracy' to keep Muslims down."¹⁵ The results of this narrative range from the youngster in an Internet café responding to an extremist video that is based on this worldview, to a mentally unbalanced American army officer, Major Nidal Malik Hasan, who killed 13 people at Fort Hood, Texas in 2009 partly because he had heard an interpretation of that narrative from an extremist Muslim cleric.

That narrative, in one form or another, has taken hold far beyond the Islamic world, and if anti-Americanism is not a sufficient motivating force, anti-globalization can serve as a supplement or substitute. Joseph Nye has pointed out that the democratization of technology allows terrorists to do much more than sulk and plot in isolation. To counter extremists' influence, wrote Nye, "democratic leaders must use soft or attractive power to disseminate a positive narrative about globalization and the prospects for a better future that attracts moderates and counters the poisonous jihadist narratives on the Web."¹⁶

Such a strategy must recognize the generational aspects of extremism, which are reflected in the use of new media. Although Osama bin Laden is the world's best-known terrorist, it was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, almost 10 years bin Laden's junior, who most thoroughly exploited online venues. Zarqawi understood the value of maintaining a consistent media presence by systematically disseminating "news" about his activities. He may have alienated people with his infamous Berg execution video, but he established himself as America's chief nemesis within Iraq and a focus of journalistic attention. When he was killed in 2006 (at age 39), much of the Western news media treated his death as a far more significant event than it really was. He had done tremendous damage—killing many more Iraqis than Americans—and used his sophisticated appreciation of new media to leverage his position within Al Qaeda's loose-limbed international network. Although many American news organizations responded to this story with exultant headlines about Zarqawi's elimination signifying "turning the corner" in Iraq, his death in a U.S. bombing raid was merely useful, not determinative, in efforts to combat the Al Qaeda in Iraq organization.

Zarqawi was successfully targeted by a combination of intelligence work and military skill, and the American missile-carrying drones in South Asia have killed additional terrorists. But

this approach will not eradicate terrorism. Every time an influential terrorist is killed, someone is certain to take his place. The ranks in the lower parts of the “pyramid” discussed earlier include many committed to the causes terrorists claim that they champion. Until extremist groups’ ranks are thinned, terrorism will continue.

Debate continues about how best to reduce those ranks. A RAND Corporation study published in 2008 examined 648 terrorist groups operating between 1968 and 2006 and found that most groups ended because their members joined the political process or their numbers were substantially reduced because members were arrested or killed by local police or intelligence agencies. Military force was largely ineffective, according to the study: “It usually has the opposite effect from what is intended: it is often overused, alienates the local population by its heavy-handed nature, and provides a window of opportunity for terrorist-group recruitment.”¹⁷

Ratcheting down counterterrorism from a military to a police/intelligence level makes sense, as does changing the rhetoric of counterterrorism. The RAND study recommended abandoning use of the phrase “war on terror” because: “The phrase raises public expectations...that there is a battlefield solution to the problem of terrorism. It also encourages others abroad to respond by conducting a jihad (or holy war)...and elevates them to the status of holy warriors. Terrorists should be perceived and described as criminals, not holy warriors.”¹⁸

If counterterrorism strategy were to shift away from a “hard power” effort toward a more political approach, the significance of media-based tactics would increase. A first task along these lines would be to make nonviolent political change seem more appealing, but that could only happen if governments alter their own institutions sufficiently to attract an expanded constituency. This is something the United States, in particular, must finally grapple with because so

many of its allies have political systems that can most charitably be called “rigged.” Until that situation changes, extremism, including violent acts, will seem justifiable even to many who would prefer another route toward change. When alternatives are not available, desperation can take hold.

These matters are crucial because terrorism around the world shows no signs of withering away on its own. Although spectacular attacks—such as those in the United States, Indonesia, Spain, the United Kingdom, India, and elsewhere—have apparently subsided (as of summer 2010), it would be dangerously foolish to relax. Al Qaeda has shown that it is not inclined to rush its planning for major attacks. Somalia and Yemen may be well on their way to becoming the next Afghanistans, with strong Al Qaeda-related activity in both countries.

In Somalia, the Shabab embrace many of the same repressive measures that the Taliban have employed in trying to dictate how Afghans should live their lives. The Shabab’s relationship with Al Qaeda is hard to precisely determine, but they share malignant intent, at the very least. The enormous cost, in lives and money, of the war in Afghanistan could continue indefinitely, with the next battlegrounds being Somalia and Yemen, and then... who knows where?

New media will be part of this. In December 2009, five American men were detained in Pakistan as they apparently tried to join Al Qaeda to fight against U.S. forces in Afghanistan. They had been recruited on line, with initial contact coming after one of the men had repeatedly commented positively about YouTube videos showing attacks on American troops. A U.S. Department of Homeland Security official said, “Online recruiting has exponentially increased, with Facebook, YouTube, and the increasing sophistication of people online.” Another apparent factor in the increase in online contacts is the success of intelligence agencies in scrutinizing activities at

mosques, community centers, and other real-, as opposed to cyber-, world places where recruiting might occur.¹⁹ Somalia's Shabab have also engaged in recruitment within the United States.²⁰

As disturbing to counterterrorism officials as this story may be, the greater fear is that this recruitment will lead not to such young men going overseas to fight, but rather finding targets close to home. As was seen in the 2005 London bombings, "homegrown terrorism" is a threat that is difficult to deter, at least through conventional security methods.

Late 2009 saw the emergence on the global stage of Anwar Al-Awlaki, the American-born Yemeni sheikh who had been implicated in the shootings at Fort Hood, Texas in November of that year. After a failed attempt to firebomb a Northwest Airlines flight from Amsterdam to Detroit, it was found that the would-be bomber, a young Nigerian named Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, had frequently visited Al-Awlaki's Web site. As more attention focused on Al-Awlaki, ties were also found to the men who planned to attack the U.S. Army base at Fort Dix, New Jersey in 2008 and to the Britons who carried out the 7/7 London bombings in 2005. More than 2,000 Al-Awlaki clips could be found on YouTube, which as of the end of 2009 had been viewed about three million times.²¹

Journalist Abdul Rahman Al-Rashed wrote that Al-Awlaki "is the bin Laden of the Internet." Noting Al-Awlaki's influence, Al-Rashed argued that "'Al Qaeda' is an ideological problem rather than an organizational one. Whilst there is a lot to do on the ground in order to eradicate this malignant disease, the first priority should be to confront extremist ideology, its theorists and scholars before its students and soldiers."²²

Al-Awlaki became the terrorist media star of the moment, but lost in most of the news coverage of his role in terrorist enterprises

was the thread of his persistent and successful use of the Internet to connect with followers and inspire them to action. Without the Internet, Al-Awlaki would be far less of a menace.

His success is also dependent on his manipulation of Islamic creed to his own purposes, a corruption of Islam that is a common tactic among terrorist recruiters. U.S. Army Colonel John M. “Matt” Venhaus, a fellow at the United States Institute of Peace, observed that “Al Qaeda recruits do not become terrorists because they are Muslim. They actually have an inadequate understanding of their own religion, which makes them vulnerable to misinterpretations of the religious doctrines.” These young men, wrote Venhaus, “typically were exposed to a very narrow interpretation of Islam.... They were not exposed to the over 1,400 years of Quranic commentary and scholarship, nor were they invited to question their instructors on finer points.”²³

This situation cries out for assertive counterprogramming from those who do not want to see Islam hijacked. Although many Western countries, including the United States, are wary about wading too deeply into religious matters, there is no way to avoid this. The great majority of Muslim clerics endorse the Islam of peace, and their voices must become more prominent in public diplomacy efforts designed to offset terrorist messages.

Discouraging news about the growth of terrorist operations in Somalia, Yemen, and elsewhere continues to accumulate, but on the other hand, polling data showing the decline in popular support for violent actions, whatever their rationale, provides encouragement to those who believe that the destructive nihilism at the heart of terrorism may be receding. Perhaps the new communication technologies can help bring an end to, or at least significantly reduce, the fierce threat of terrorism.

No magic formula exists to reach this result. To get underway, the best plan may be to create a comprehensive strategy that will use in a coordinated way the many component elements of new media to counter the work of terrorists. So far, extremists who embrace violence have done a better job of mastering these media, but there is no reason they should be allowed to continue to hold the upper hand.

This takes us back to the fundamentals of public diplomacy. If terrorist organizations draw their support from a large public, they should not be allowed to access that public without competition from those who want to bring terrorism to an end. Conventional diplomacy operates on too narrow a wavelength to compete in this way, but well-designed public diplomacy can reach large numbers of the political public and can challenge terrorism at its base.

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