

The Media's Role in the 'War on Terror'

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Many different terms have been used to define the story that has dominated the world's media for the past 6 years: the global war on terror; a global insurgency; a clash of civilizations; a clash of extremisms; a war on Islam.

Here's how it's been described by Dr Ayman al Zawahari, 2ic of al Qaeda. "We are in a battle - and more than half this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media... We are in a media battle for the hearts and minds of our umma."

Terrorism has always been, at least in part, about grabbing media attention. Sir Richard Dearlove, the former head of MI6, has called terrorism 'an extreme act of political communication'. Back in the 1970s the Palestinian plane hijackers used to hold press conferences on the tarmac. The Italian Red Brigades used to strike on Saturdays to get into the Sunday newspapers.

As Brian Jenkins of the Rand Corporation famously said: "Terrorists want lots of people watching, not lots of people dead."

That of course has changed. Today's generation of terrorists *do* want lots of people dead; but they also crave the media coverage for propaganda and recruitment, to help win hearts and minds and foot soldiers.

I attended a security conference in Sydney recently, where one of the speakers was Gordon Corra, a BBC journalist who has reported extensively on terrorism. Corra has documented the activities of al Qaeda's media division, which has been a crucial arm of al Qaeda since its formation in the late '80s. Last year al Qaeda's production company, al Sahab, released a total of 58 promotional videos. You will have seen some of them – they are professionally made and very slickly produced, with captions, effects, voiceover, credits and a music track. This year they have surpassed that number already, making 2007 their most prolific year ever, with a new video produced and distributed on average every 5 or 6 days.

The internet has of course greatly facilitated AQ's media strategy, enabling it to bypass traditional media to get its message out. The number of militant Islamist websites has exploded from a few hundred about five years ago, to several thousand today.

The militants are innovative in their use of the media, and they have a sense of humor too. There is one program called 'Hidden camera jihad', made by a Sunni insurgent TV station in Iraq, and also broadcast in Europe, which features clips of hidden camera shots showing attacks on US forces – set to a laughter track. A kind of jihadist Funniest Home Videos.

There's also a website called youbombit.com – unless it's been closed down by now – which features power point presentations showing how to make car bombs.

The militants also target the mainstream media. The video appearances by bin Laden and Al Zawahiri invariably receive major play around the world. Al Qaeda and its allies routinely film their attacks – usually from several different angles – and the footage is fed into the regular media, often through Al Jazeera.

In short, the jihadists have made harnessing the media a central part of their campaign. As al Zawahiri put it: "We must get our message across to the masses of the nation and break the media siege".

And those wishing to counter al Qaeda - and to counter the media focus on its violent and vengeful interpretation of Islam – could take a leaf out of AQ's book, because its approach has been highly successful. It's about engaging with the media, harnessing the media, even 'breaking the media siege', if you like, to get your message across. It's about influencing and even making the news, not just being a consumer or a victim of it. And it's about creating an alternative narrative, and alternative stories to the story of violent jihad that has so captured the world's media.

You need to understand the media, to de-mystify it, in order to try to achieve this. The media is not some vast evil conglomerate. There's nothing sinister or even very complicated about the way it works. It is not a single entity with a united view - any more than the Muslim community is. To say 'journalists are untrustworthy and always distort the story' – which is something I hear constantly – is as accurate and useful as saying 'all Muslims are terrorists'.

Remember that when we talk about 'the media', what we actually mean is the 'news media'. The word media, by its definition, simply means a 'vehicle' or 'agency' for communication information. The news media consists of thousands of individual journalists, working for organisations, whose job is to report the news.

Their job is *not* actually to promote tolerance and harmony, or to foster understanding and goodwill. Some of us certainly believe those are worthy aims which we strive to achieve when we can. But the principal task, particularly for daily news reporters, is simply to report the news.

In his introduction, David Wright-Neville told you that I would be speaking about 'the media's role in combatting terrorism'. For a working journalist, this is a problematic notion. Does the media in fact have a 'role in combatting terrorism'? I'm not entirely

sure it does. Remember that our job is not the same as that of the police or intelligence agencies, and an essential part of our job must be to critique their performance. The media has to be very careful about - and journalists are instinctively resistant to - being co-opted in such a way. It's certainly our role to report accurately and responsibly and not to inflame the problem - which is not necessarily the same thing as playing an active role in 'combatting' terrorism.

Of course to suggest that journalists are mere passive reporters is not true, because we get to decide what *makes* the news as well. And for the most part it's just the really obvious stories of the day. Journalists and editors don't sit around in the morning saying 'how can we make Muslims look bad today?'. They sit around saying 'What's happened? What have we got?' It's not rocket science. Plane crashes, fires, murders, political scandals, terrorist attacks. They're all news. The Grand Mufti, Sheik Hilali, says women who don't cover are like raw meat. That's news too.

These decisions often have to be made quickly, working to tight deadlines, often on fast-breaking stories. Some of the journalists making those decisions are very clever, but we can also be lazy, unoriginal, creatures of habit. We report the stories we know and understand. Plane crashes and murders - they're easy; the intricacies of the Islamic faith - now that's much harder, so we steer clear of that one; and anyway, it's not really the stuff of daily news.

We also report the stories that are handed to us on a plate by people who know how to manipulate the media and harness it to their own ends. Politicians hold doorstops every day outside parliament house and talk in catchy 10-minute grabs for the nightly news. Protestors hold rallies with music and colorful placards. Greenies chain themselves to trees. Lobby groups hand out press releases and provide spokesmen or women who've had professional media training. And terrorists with an eye for a spectacular photo opportunity fly planes into the World Trade Centre and bomb nightclubs in Bali. All of them are tailoring their acts - to varying extents - to ensure media attention.

I have to say I tire of people complaining that the media makes Muslims look bad, that the media makes all Muslims look like terrorists. It may sound trite to say this, but the media didn't crash those planes or bomb those nightclubs - militant Islamists did it, and they did it invoking the name of Islam. The media doesn't make Muslims look bad. Terrorists who kill civilians while shouting 'Allah Akhbar' make Muslims look bad.

I also tire of people complaining about the use of terms like 'Islamist terrorist'. 'A terrorist is a terrorist', they say, regardless of religion. The fact is that 95% - that's my estimate - of the men arrested in Australia in the last six or seven years on terrorism offences have been Muslims claiming to act in the name of Islam. I think you would find a similar percentage applies globally. I agree we shouldn't call them 'Muslim terrorists' or 'Islamic terrorists'. But 'Islamist terrorists' is a perfectly appropriate term in my view, because that's what they are.

I remember years ago, when I was a young radio journalist in Melbourne in the 1980s, we were constantly reporting horrible attacks carried out with meat-cleavers by members of Vietnamese criminal gangs. ‘Choppings’ we used to call them. At the time we were forbidden from saying the ‘choppers’ were ‘Vietnamese’, supposedly because it was racist. In fact it was sheer political correctness. Thankfully those days are gone. Let’s not return to them.

It’s certainly true that some of the media coverage of this story has been exaggerated, distorted, inaccurate, unfair, sensationalized, even hysterical. This is just plain bad journalism and there’s no excuse for it, although it’s worth noting that much of it is a function of the speed at which journalists have to work to meet their deadlines. Just as often it’s a function of sheer sloppiness, laziness and unprofessionalism, or the urge to get a better headline. Unfortunately the same criticism can be made of the media’s coverage of any story. I *don’t* believe it applies especially to stories involving Muslims.

People are very quick to blame the media. It’s easy. It absolves them of responsibility to do anything else.

When I was invited to this conference, I asked Hussein Tahiri for some guidance as to what I should speak about, and he referred me to a Muslim youth forum, held in Preston in 2005, to discuss the impact of the ‘war on terror’ on young Muslims and their sense of belonging in Australia.

Muslim students were asked to nominate their top five concerns, and they listed them in the following order. Number one: ‘the media’; followed by discrimination, racism, fear, and education and employment. I found this quite striking, that in the face of such serious issues, they would list ‘the media’ as their number one concern.

The reason for this was explained in just one paragraph: (and I quote)
“The youth attribute responsibility for the discrimination they experience to the media, who they consider responsible for having linked Arabs and Islam to terrorism explicitly and incorrectly.” That’s a very sweeping statement and a serious accusation. If it’s true the media has a lot to answer for. I was eager to see what evidence, or examples they would provide to support this. As a journalist – a good journalist – I rely on facts and evidence. You can’t make sweeping assertion without it.

The young Muslims went on to describe a range of grievances... They talked about inter-generational family unemployment, with one Lebanese youth saying it was seen as ‘the Lebo way’ for his parents to be on pensions and his brothers to be out of work. They complained about their poor English language skills, and the fact that this was a barrier to further education and employment. They didn’t know how to get to university.

They were worried about the new anti-terrorism legislation, which they felt targeted Muslims. They lacked confidence in the police. They were treated unfairly by teachers and fellow students, and discriminated against by employers. They were called names,

like ‘nappy head’, ‘rag-head’ and ‘Osama’. They encountered feelings of ‘fear’ within the wider community, ignorance and stereotyping of Arabs and Muslims.

These are all troubling and legitimate concerns, which deserve to be taken seriously. Yet somehow - for all these grievances - the media is primarily to blame. They didn’t offer any further explanation of how or why, except for the single sentence I quoted earlier.

Well I’m sorry, but I don’t buy it. It doesn’t make sense. It doesn’t stand up to scrutiny. The fact that they say it – and apparently believe it – doesn’t make it true. It’s also counter-productive because it’s a distraction from genuinely addressing a number of important and complicated issues.

There is a great deal at stake here, because we know now from research – by US academic and author Marc Sageman, and the New York Police Department, among others – that Muslim diaspora communities in which young 2nd and 3rd generation males feel alienated and discriminated against are particularly vulnerable to Islamic extremism. So we must address these issues. And it’s not good enough to simply say ‘it’s the media’s fault’.

I’m not saying that media coverage is not a problem at all. It is clearly *part* of the problem. But it’s *not* ‘the problem’. I believe the problem was more accurately summarized by a report from the non-profit think tank Issues Deliberation Australia, after a so-called deliberative poll it held recently, when a group of community leaders and thinkers got together in Canberra for a couple of days to discuss Muslim and non-Muslim relations to Australia.

The report concluded that “Racism is alive and simmering in Australia”, which it described as a country that welcomes diversity and multiculturalism in principle, “but struggles when confronted with obviously different cultures in its heartland”. There’s nothing very surprising in this finding, nor should we be overly alarmed. The racism endemic in Australia is more benign than that in many other countries (unless of course you’re an Aborigine).

Australia is a paradox – a land of immigrants where the latest generation of newcomers is routinely derided as being ‘un-Australian’ and a threat to ‘the Australian way’. In the 1960s it was the Greeks and Italians; in the 70s the Vietnamese. Today those early Europeans are accepted as true blue Aussies, and Asians too are on their way to gaining that acceptance.

It’s almost a rite of passage toward becoming an Australia; you cop it, then you get to dish it out. A Muslim woman I interviewed recently - for a story about women who cover their faces - told me how she was hectored by a Greek fruit vendor at the Victoria market, who yelled at her ‘Why you wear this for? We don’t like this in Australia?’ She threw an avocado at him.

In this post September 11 decade, religion has replaced race as the source of our ritual derision. The current target is Muslims - wherever they're from - including those born and raised in Australia.

A third of people interviewed in a recent Newspoll survey said they believe Muslims make Australia a worse place to live. 35% believe Muslims threaten to change the Australian way of life, though happily 51% disagree with that. Nearly half think they have a negative effect on national security, and on how people in Australia get along together.

So, given that the media clearly is a *part* of the problem, how do you deal with it? The answer is – you engage. That's what the politicians, the greenies, the lobbyists and the terrorists are doing. Engaging with the media. They're not sitting around complaining about it, or accusing it of bias, or bemoaning its ignorance. They're engaging with it – and it's working for them.

The government is certainly doing it. Much of the tone for the media's coverage of terrorism has been set I believe by the government, with its 'tough on terrorism' and 'tough on national security' approach. People complain that the government controls the media, or that the media is simply a mouthpiece for the government; it surprises me how often people say it. It's not true of course. What is true is the government knows very well how to manipulate the media and how to ensure its message is repeated over and over again. The Opposition, as we've seen, largely mirrors the government's line, which suggests to me that it must be what the people want, although I believe Australians have recently grown tired and cynical about this.

Agencies like the police and ASIO also engage extensively with the media. Like the government, they brief journalists, put out press releases, hold news conferences, and feed stories to favored reporters.

And that is what you - the Muslim community - need to be doing. Make contact with the editors, the specialist reporters, the opinion writers. Talk to them, offer them stories. Ring them up, lobby them. Complain when you disagree with them. Demand a right of reply. Hold press conferences; write letters to the editor; write feature articles.

You have to pick who you engage with of course. Target the intelligent ones. Personally I wouldn't bother with Today Tonight. A lot of this is happening already. Waleed Ali's articles in The Australian are one very good example. That Deliberations Australia conference that I mentioned is another.

A few years ago, when a new mosque opened at Dee Why on Sydney's northern beaches, they held a sausage sizzle and invited the local community along to celebrate. What a great idea; there's nothing more Australian than a sausage sizzle. I think every mosque in Australia should have one - and don't forget to invite the media.

I wrote a feature for The Australian recently on women who wear the niqab, the Islamic face covering. It was inspired by an extract I'd read from Waleed Ali's book about the

symbolism of the hijab. I was amazed to learn that many of the women who wear the niqab – in fact most, according to the ones I interviewed – are not newly-arrived migrants from some backward foreign country who are forced to wear it by their husbands; they are Australian born converts to Islam, who choose to wear it as a sign of their faith.

It took me weeks to find these women and persuade them to talk. They were reluctant, defensive, even paranoid. They assumed journalists can't be trusted, although I don't believe any of them had ever met a journalist. Finally they agreed; I did the story, and they were very happy with the result. They took a risk, they decided to engage, and it paid off.

Seminars like this one are also useful - as long as we're actually listening to one another and genuinely engaging – not just going through the motions. I attended a similar conference to this one in 2005, held by the same organizers if my memory serves me correctly, and also on the topic of the relationship between the news media and the Muslim community. A Muslim academic – whose name has long since escaped me - railed at length against the media for its sensationalism and bias and inaccuracy. All fair enough criticisms.

When it was my turn to speak – to respond to her and others' criticisms – I looked around for this academic in the room, and discovered to my surprise that she wasn't there. She had gone. Presumably she had some other pressing appointment, which I thought was very odd. Apparently she just wanted to have her say – she didn't actually want to engage. I wondered afterwards whether there was really any point.

If you're willing to engage, you *can* influence the media, and play a part in what makes the news, and how it's reported. But don't assume that's all you need to do.

People's views are shaped not only by the media, but by a myriad of influences: Their own experience and their personal responses to events; by talking to their neighbours and friends; by listening to their politicians; by what they hear at work and at school.

My 7-year-old son came home from school recently and told me one of his friends had told him that 'Muslim' was a bad word. I was shocked to hear this. A few months before that he had told me that he was a Muslim. We had been on a holiday to Malaysia and he'd been particularly taken with a lady tour guide we had named Sue, who wore a hijab. When we got home he would put a towel over his head and say 'I'm a Muslim'. When I asked him then what a Muslim was, he said it was someone who really believed in God. So when he came home more recently, having been told that 'Muslim' was a bad word, I found it very disturbing, although it wasn't hard to persuade him he had been more accurate the first time.

My point is, that didn't come from the media, it came from another child; who knows where he got it. So what do you do in response to that – deny it's happening? Rail against it? Of course you don't, you engage.

Personally I believe Islamic group should be going into the schools, explaining to children what Islam is and what Muslims do and believe in, and emphasising the similarities, the common ground, which as *we* all know are far greater than the differences. My son's school has scripture classes – Catholic, Anglican, Jewish, Bahai and 'non', as they call the one for the children of atheists. Why Bahai, I have no idea, but I assume it's because some enterprising parent of the Bahai faith organised it. It's very popular among parents who want an alternative – though I'm sure some of them don't even know what Bahai is. But that's engagement for you.

I believe Islamic groups should be going into the schools and engaging like that. I don't know how many kids you'd get signing up for Islamic scripture classes.. But I for one, as a parent, would certainly welcome having someone go into my son's school and explain to the children that Muslim is not a bad word, and that Muslims are simply people who believe in God, just as they do, but worship in a different way. And if you could throw in a sausage sizzle and invite the media along, even better. Because everyone knows journalists love a free lunch. Thank you.

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