The Conflict With Extreme Islamism – How To Compete In The Global Information Environment

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The Conflict With Extreme Islamism – How To Compete In The Global Information Environment. Summary

Extreme Islamists and governments compete in a fast, freewheeling and global information environment to inform, persuade and mobilise domestic and international audiences. The UK government competes poorly due to inconsistencies in its strategic communications and over-control of its relationship with all forms of media.

The emergence of extreme Islamism has initiated a strategic information conflict between its advocates and those arguing for a moderate interpretation of Islam. This conflict takes place in conditions where governments have no advantage over stateless opponents. Cheap and mobile digital technology allows anybody to transmit words and images and the environment is impossible to control. Those institutions that attempt to do so are destined to clumsiness, delay and being outnumbered and outpaced by quicker and louder voices.

Extreme Islamists have become ready exploiters of the modern information domain in their conflict to win the hearts and minds of Muslim communities. They use a compelling strategic narrative to persuade them that Islam is under a global attack from ‘Zionists’ and ‘Crusaders’. Working in dispersed, fugitive groups, extreme Islamists are also bound together by this simple narrative, which acts as guidance for their words and actions. It is their strategy as well as their primary tool of conflict.

The UK government structures tasked with the security of the nation have reacted defensively to the contemporary information environment. They have imposed strict rules for their servants’ interaction with formal and informal media and built a new ‘class’ of communications officers to try and control external communications. This approach will never provide the deluge of information and interpretation that can compete with the extremists.

The UK government needs to develop a single compelling national narrative, which guides the words and actions of its servants and exposes the flaws of the extremists’ story. In formulating this narrative, it needs to be a better ‘listener’ to local realities amongst contested audiences and exploit all its repositories of knowledge about the appeal of opposing communications. It also needs to universalise the communication of its own narrative through every means at its disposal.

To create momentum and agility in the communication of a national narrative and to compete effectively in the global information environment, the UK government needs to liberate the many small voices of the state, especially its local and junior representatives. In a world where authority is automatically challenged, junior voices have the potential to gain a credibility that eludes their seniors. If they are emboldened by training and an institutional culture where the information conflict has primacy over other activity, this multitude of government actors will challenge the extremists in every recess of the information domain and align their own actions more convincingly in support of the UK story. They will provide a proactive engagement with all media all the time, including an instant response to extremist propaganda. They will also understand that learning how to compete in the new global information environment must surpass their knowledge of more traditional aspects of conflict and ultimately direct its conduct.
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contents Page</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme Islamism - what it is and what it wants</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The global information environment and the impact of new technologies</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fast and confident – the exploitation of the global information</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fast and confident – the exploitation of the global information</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fast and confident – the exploitation of the global information</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fast and confident – the exploitation of the global information</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control and delay - the UK and US governments’ approach to the global</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control and delay - the UK and US governments’ approach to the global</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control and delay - the UK and US governments’ approach to the global</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control and delay - the UK and US governments’ approach to the global</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The primacy of narrative in the conflict with extreme Islamism</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The primacy of narrative in the conflict with extreme Islamism</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The primacy of narrative in the conflict with extreme Islamism</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberating the many small voices of government to compete</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

The UK is ill-prepared to contend with the influence of extreme Islamist propaganda and its threat to national interests. This places the UK’s Armed Forces at a disadvantage when it faces groups, such as the Taliban, who draw their rationale from the Islamist message. At the same time, the UK government has directed a disproportionate effort to physically fighting these groups as opposed to challenging their ideological arguments. This paper examines the difficulties in the UK’s approach to strategic communications against extremism and makes recommendations on new strategies and working practices.

The emergence of extreme Islamism has initiated a strategic information conflict between its advocates and those arguing for a moderate understanding of Islam and its partnership with democratic ideas. This conflict takes place in a freewheeling global information environment where governments have no advantage in a competition with stateless opponents for the ears and minds of contested audiences. A robust and comprehensive UK information policy and capability needs to be developed from the lessons offered by the UK and US’s recent experience of ideological conflict.

While examining the contemporary information environment, this paper attempts to illuminate the role of narrative, described by Freedman as ‘compelling story lines which can explain events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn’. It argues that the UK’s strategic narrative, promoted in opposition to that of extreme Islamists, is the primary means of defeating them. This is not recognised in state structures, procedures and culture. The UK neither formulates a narrative that is the sum of its understanding of how to defeat the adversary’s vision nor does it communicate such a narrative through every means at its disposal. The UK government has instead reacted to the challenges of the contemporary information environment by restricting its servants’ contact with it and increasing the numbers and professionalization of its communications staff. This paper argues that these attempts at control will not bring the success sought.

The paper suggests how the UK government can invest in developing a strategic narrative that is more compelling to contested audiences. It also proposes how this narrative can be used to free junior government servants to compete effectively with the extremists in the information conflict.

Little difference is drawn in this paper between the activities covered under the terms: strategic communications, public diplomacy, media operations, public affairs, information operations and psychological operations. The view is taken that they represent different institutional approaches to the same aim of ‘mobilizing, informing and persuading’. Rather than seeking to dissect the differences in these approaches, the paper’s interest is in the concept of a strategic narrative that can act as direction for all strands of government activity in countering extremist ideology. Of the common terminology used, strategic communications comes closest to this interest.

As a reflection of the paper’s promotion of a UK government information policy that binds departments of state together, terms such as ‘government’ and ‘state institutions’ tend to be used in preference to naming separate departments. Debate on the subject of this paper is strongest in US circles, though it is emerging as a topic in various UK journals. Given the similar experience of both countries in the conflict with extreme Islamism, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan, US material is used to draw lessons for the UK.

**Extreme Islamism – What It Is And What It Wants**

Extreme Islamism is an ideology based on a narrow and fanatical interpretation of Islamic texts to promote a significantly different way of life.3 Abu Musab-al Zarqawi, the Al Qaeda leader, explained:

> Our political agenda ...is that of the saying of the prophet (peace be upon him), I have been sent with the sword, between the hands of the hour, until Allah is worshipped alone...that is what determines our political goal. We fight ...until the law of Allah is implemented, and the first step is to expel the enemy, then establish the Islamic state, then we set forth to conquer the lands of Muslims to return them back to us, then after that, we fight the kuffar (disbelievers) until they accept one of the three. I have been sent with the sword, between the hands of the hour; this is our political agenda.4

By trying to restore the Caliphate in a form that follows one interpretation of Islam, extreme Islamists are pitched against co-religionists as much as they are pitched against secular communities or those of other religions. Motivations to support the ideology may differ, but ideologues are bound by a desire to win a struggle for power over the whole Islamic community.5 This struggle is also between different visions of how Islamic states should be run and the conduct of their communities. Ideologues claim access to a higher form of knowledge to justify the use of extreme measures to secure dominance over communities which do not accept their interpretation. This higher knowledge forms their story or strategic narrative.

The presence of troops from western, historically-Christian nations in Islamic Asian and Arab countries produces the media images that support the extreme Islamist’s strategic narrative. Loss of Arab or Asian Muslim life to the actions of these troops feeds a story of oppression and religiously-motivated revolt against an invader.6 Violence is legitimized ‘as a necessity forced upon the weak as the only means with which to respond to an oppressive enemy.’7 Compliance with Islamic behaviour is prominent in extremist communication strategies as a defence against corrupting modernity and western culture. The extreme Islamist enjoys many opportunities in

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6 Bockstette, op. cit., p. 9.

the twenty first century global information environment to propagate these messages.

The Global Information Environment And The Impact Of New Technologies

The revolution in how information is transmitted globally has been brought about by the invention and availability of new digital technologies. The information revolution’s characteristics are ubiquity and immediacy; an environment where most things are known very rapidly by most of mankind. In this ‘new transparency’ a competition has emerged between states and their opponents for media space. Governments often appear slow and powerless to control the information environment whereas extreme Islamists are lively exploiters of it.

The developments in information technology are in bandwidth and transmitting capability. Satellite communications can be carried as hand baggage on flights and can transmit from anywhere in the world.8 The combination of the digital camera and internet access in cheap mobile phones has created a multitude of ‘citizen journalists’, able to surge recordings around the globe through media agencies or informally through the internet.9 News content generated by those who are not professional journalists has become a component of global media networks. Newspapers regularly cite readers’ comments and depend on blogs for some of their news.

As a result people who do not belong to powerful state bodies have an ‘unprecedented mass ability to bear witness.’10 If they are armed with a credible message, they can potentially conduct a form of information operation with a global audience; they have the opportunity to become an ‘information warrior’.11 It is an environment that will intensify as new information technologies spread in the developing world and those born into the digital world - ‘born digitals’12 - replace generations who were not.

A glimpse into the future of this environment is provided by the UK public’s response to the bombs placed by extremist Islamists on the London transport system on 7 July 2005. The BBC received 20 000 emails, 3 000 texts, 1 000 digital images and 20 video clips in the hours after the incidents, representing an ‘unmanageable deluge’ of information and comment that outpaced professional journalism’s attempts to report on the same subject.13 This response from a society with a mature understanding of information technology foretells the media environment of the future.

Nik Gowing has dubbed the environment ‘cruel and arbitrary’, being one where a ‘tyranny of real time’ provides little chance to verify accusations before a response is expected from the organisations involved in the deeds reported.14 It is a ‘tyranny’ that

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13 Gowing, ‘“Skyful of Lies”’, p. 29.
applies to the reporter and the state institution alike; the former to secure the story and transmit it ahead of the competition while the latter seeks to steer the information in its favour. Control of this environment is unachievable; information superiority is unlikely and at best fleeting. It is an open struggle of many voices trying to promote their information in a manner that allows it to ‘somehow rise to the top’ amongst the noise.15

The new information environment opens people to persuasion from all quarters; the minority with a seductive argument can rapidly connect with the majority. The television, the internet and mobile digital transmission of words and images have all become instruments of a ‘new kind of politics’ where the less powerful are daily able to challenge the more powerful.16 The world-wide-web in particular provides extremists with the informational equivalent of marshes and mountains for guerrilla activity from which to attack state authorities.17 It is an environment in which governments have no advantage over unregulated voices.

The competition is not just between governments and extremists, but also amongst journalists and their media organisations. Journalists’ attitudes to covering conflicts have been examined by Eytan Gilboa18 and John Pauly.19 Both describe how governments and other groups attempt to cajole the journalist into reproducing their information and interpretations.20 In response, journalists argue that their job is to bear witness to events, but not to participate.21 However, Pauly suggests that this self-imposed code of conduct serves primarily to protect journalists in an environment where there are many different claims on their loyalties. He proposes that journalists are not impartial witnesses, but actors in a ‘theatre of social action’. They secure an audience and public loyalty through their ability to provide a straightforward understanding of events that will resonate with the readership’s perceptions of the world. The greatest force in their work, he argues, is beating their rivals in the competition for audiences not just by being first with news but also by creating a ‘compelling narrative’ out of current events.22

Rupert Smith supports the view that above all ‘the interest of a journalist or producer...is driven by a need to fill space with words and pictures.’23 In addition, he suggests that a state body competing in an information conflict needs a ‘narrator’, ‘one who explains to the audience what has happened, its significance and where events might lead. This person is more than just a spokesman: he is telling a story, by linking the events as they occur...into the most convincing story in the

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15 Collings and Rohozinski, op. cit., p. 15.
20 Ibid., op. cit., p. 19.
21 Gowing, op. cit., p. 233.
circumstances."24 The interpretations of Gilboa, Pauly and Smith illuminate a contemporary global information environment where state, media and extremist actors are competing not just for media ‘space’ but also for the accompanying narrative.

Gowing helps to identify another element within this competition: ‘You can be First, and you can be Fast. But in entering the race for the information space how Flawed – how mistaken and inaccurate – might you be?’25 For democratically accountable government, the accuracy of the information it places in the public domain is important for the sake of its legitimacy. However, the time taken to verify information slows its transmission. For the journalist, this concern is less important, since the information can be presented as another’s report or as unconfirmed in order to publicise it quickly. For the extremist, accuracy is of minor concern.

Cori Dauber, who has conducted a series of interviews with US military officers in relation to Iraqi insurgent disinformation activity, provides several examples of the advantage extremists enjoy. In one, insurgents claim in the media that five US Marines had been captured in western Iraq. The Marine Corps Public Affairs Officer recalls the actions required to investigate this information:

so that we could ultimately determine that there were not five guys who were out of our control, but that took about eight hours to accomplish…that’s pretty amazing… within hours to account for 25,000 Marines and Soldiers…but the key is that for eight hours the truth or the perceived truth out there was five Marines had been captured…for eight hours you’ve had a different version of what people perceived is true. And that’s one of the biggest challenges.26

Deirdre Collings and Rafal Rohozinski conclude from contemporary counterinsurgency campaigns that ‘when it comes to rumors of war-fighting going wrong, the first stories onto the wire stick. Even if these stories prove to be exaggerated or false, the damage to your reputation, and moral legitimacy, is hard to erase.’27 Communities outside the state can use rumour and misinformation to shape perceptions with ease. Competition in the global information environment is intense and it is also tipped in the favour of the non-state actor.

**Fast And Confident – The Exploitation Of The Global Information Environment By Extreme Islamists**

Extreme Islamists have recognised the opportunity provided by the advent of global, instant media reporting and the arrival of cheap inter-personal media devices. From the mid-1990s, Islamists began to exploit opportunities to transmit their views and provide the rationale for extremist acts through the mass media.

In 2001 Al-Sahab Islamic Media Publication Company was formed by Al-Qaeda to develop links with the new media outlet, Al-Jazeera. Speeches by the senior Al-

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24 Ibid., p 391.
27 Collings and Rohozinski, op. cit., p. 2.
Qaeda leadership were broadcast carrying the Al-Sahab logo. The Taliban has developed from an organisation that was suspicious of modern media technologies to one that uses them with increasing confidence and sophistication. In mid 2001, the Taliban banned the use of the internet on moral grounds, but now its website ‘The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan’ is updated hourly in English and four regional languages. Videos from the conflict in Afghanistan continuously serve this site even though the Taliban was opposed to the use of cameras on Islamic grounds when in power.

Extreme Islamists have understood information to be the primary tool of conflict. As Ayman al-Zawahiri, deputy to Usama Bin Laden, suggested in 2005: ‘We are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media…we are in a media battle for the hearts and minds of our Ummah.’ In the Washington Post, Susan Glaser and Steve Coll wrote of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s followers:

Never before has a guerrilla organization so successfully intertwined its real-time war on the ground with its electronic jihad, making Zarqawi’s group practitioners of what experts say will be the future of insurgent warfare, where no act goes unrecorded and the atrocities seem to be committed in order to be filmed and distributed nearly instantaneously online…Filming an attack has become an integral part of the attack itself.

The extreme Islamist’s use of the contemporary global information environment has gained them a favourable ‘communication asymmetry.’

In a separate development to the strategies of long-running Islamist organisations, Akil Awan and Mina Al-Lami have drawn attention to the emergence of a diverse extremist debate amongst a ‘young unaffiliated and increasingly diasporic demographic for whom Al-Qa’da represents little more than a motif.’ In the open conversation among young Muslims on the web, Awan and Al-Lami highlight the strength of the ‘meta-narrative’ of the extremists:

– a prism through which they require the Muslim masses to view contemporary conflicts as part of a wider global attack on Islam, by what they perceive to be a Zionist-Crusader alliance, in response to which they claim to serve as the crucial vanguard. The unsanctioned and exuberant proliferation

28 Bockstette, op. cit., p. 11-12.
32 Bockstette, op. cit., p. 18.
34 Ibid., p.19.
of jihadist media …by autonomous individuals may serve to divest Al-Qa’da of control of the message. But the overarching narrative is so alluringly simple, and so germane to current events, that its self-perpetuation is assured, so long as ‘Islamic’ conflicts remain unresolved and Muslim grievances persist.36

Extreme Islamists have a compelling strategic narrative and spread it easily in the global information environment. This acts as a guide for the words and deeds not only of active operational groups, but also for an array of other Islamist groups and individuals.

**Control And Delay – The UK And US Governments’ Approach To The Global Information Environment**

Governments fear and respect the global information environment and they are frustrated at the ability of extremists to readily exploit it. In reaction, they have tried to control their institutions’ relationships with this world through the imposition of strict rules and by increasing the numbers of their strategic communicators and information officers. However, the advantage they seek in the conflict with extremism remains elusive.

There is a perception amongst journalists that extreme Islamists are more media savvy than the government institutions they face.37 Gowing suggests there is a lack of confidence amongst government bodies in their approach to the new information environment - ‘Traditional mindsets and reactions continue to prevail while media realities shift at high speed in fresh and unforgiving directions.’38 He describes a culture of ‘latent but inappropriate fear of entering the space due to the inherent risks of being wrong or too hasty…’39 An example is an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) air strike in Azizabad, Afghanistan in August 2008, which resulted in civilian casualties. These were reported by ISAF as numbering seven until local video evidence, broadcast in the international media, forced it to investigate and eventually change its estimate to thirty three civilian deaths. The subsequent US report into the incident found that there were ‘still very big institutional and cultural resistances inside the military…’ to the release of information, which had inhibited the commander of ISAF dealing effectively with this crisis.40

Similar analysis is provided for the US and UK experience in Iraq. Andrew Garfield writes that:

The coalition has failed to counter enemy propaganda either by responding rapidly with effective counter messages or by proactively challenging the messages, methods, and ideology that the insurgents and extremist promote and exploit….while the coalition fumbles its information operations, the

38 Gowing, ‘“Skyful of Lies”’, op. cit., p. 6.
39 Ibid., op. cit., p. 2.
insurgents and militia groups are adept at releasing timely messages to undermine support for the Iraqi government and bolster their own perceived potency. The slow speed of the U.S military’s clearance process – typically it takes 3-5 days to approve even a simple information operations product such as a leaflet or billboard – creates an information vacuum that Iraqis fill with conspiracy theories and gossip often reflecting the exaggerations or outright lies of insurgents and extremists.\textsuperscript{41}

Dauber refers to an Iraqi and US Special Forces operation in 2006, which killed up to seventeen Jaish al-Mahdi armed insurgents. Approximately forty-five minutes after the operation, photographs of corpses appeared on the internet looking as if they were positioned in prayer. The accompanying text claimed that they had been killed in a mosque by the US military. Al Jazeera and other media outlets broadcast this as news on the same day. The official response was supplied by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Combined Joint Special Operations Commander General Peter Pace three days after the event. Dauber comments that their information lacked credibility; General Pace replying to several journalists that: ‘We weren’t there but we will be glad to get you those answers’. Dauber suggests the troops who carried out the action would have been more effective media briefers and would have been capable of doing so immediately. US operational video of the incident proved insurgent claims to be false but this was only revealed after a month-long investigation.\textsuperscript{42}

Recognising deficiencies in its strategic communications, the US has increased the numbers of communications officers and improved their skills and career structure. US Defense Planning Guidance 2004-2009 directed that information operations should become a core military competency supporting operations.\textsuperscript{43} This trend has been reflected in the UK, where there was a seventy three percent increase in government communications staff between 1998 and 2008. The biggest increase in central government has been in the Ministry of Defence where the total number is now reported to be two hundred and fifty-five.\textsuperscript{44} A UK government debate about strategic communications is focused on a perceived ‘lack of professionalisation’ and ‘lack of career recognition’ amongst communications officers.\textsuperscript{45}

The UK government also imposes strict control on its servants’ interaction with the media, requiring any contact to be cleared by media departments beforehand.\textsuperscript{46} The nation’s information strategies have been dominated by senior communications staff whose views have been defined by their media experience in domestic politics and short-lived international crises such as the military intervention in Kosovo in 1999.

\textsuperscript{41} A. Garfield, ‘The U.S. Counter-Propaganda Failure in Iraq’, \textit{Middle East Quarterly}, Fall 2007, pp. 23-32, p. 23.
\textsuperscript{42} Dauber, op. cit., pp. 13-14.
\textsuperscript{44} Matthew O’Toole, ‘Interview: Matt Tee, Head of Government Communications Profession, Tells Matthew O’Toole About His Plans for Whitehall’s Messengers’, \textit{Civil Service World}, 23 September 2009, p. 13.
\textsuperscript{45} Head of MOD Information Operations, ‘The Future of Military Influence’, Lecture Notes, Advanced Command and Staff College, UK Defence Academy, Shrivenham, March 2010.
and the invasion of Iraq in 2003. It is this group that argues for tighter control of government interaction with the media space, interpreted by some as taking the “tools of political ‘spin’” and adapting them for conflict. Regardless of the accuracy of this analysis, the view prevails that leaders ‘stand to gain more than ever before from controlling the media and shaping their output.’

Despite the increase in numbers of strategic communications staff and the development of communications policy, some amongst those charged to contend with extreme Islamism remain concerned that the ideological struggle is still balanced in favour of the Islamists. In the UK the Chief of General Staff has recently concluded that ‘the communications revolution means that war of the present and the future is about people; their support and trust. To succeed we must be among the people. But we seem to be learning these lessons of globalisation more slowly than our enemies.’

The Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staffs (JCS) recently questioned the need for the growing professionalization of strategic communications:

> It is time for us to take a harder look at “strategic communication”...I believe we have walked away from the original intent. By organizing to it – creating a whole structure around it – we have allowed strategic communications to become a thing instead of a process, an abstract thought instead of a way of thinking. It is sadly something of a cottage industry.

He continues, ‘we need to worry a lot less about how to communicate our actions and much more about what our actions communicate’. In summary, measures to control information have prevailed over those that would help to identify a winning narrative, communicate it and act in support of it.

**The Primacy Of Narrative In The Conflict With Extreme Islamism**

The frustrations of the US and UK’s interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan where Islamists cannot be defeated ‘without absurd costs and ambiguous results’, has furthered a debate on how to secure desired political outcomes by co-option rather than coercion. ‘Soft power’ measures are promoted for use in a ‘competition for attractiveness, legitimacy and credibility’ not just between states but also between states and non-state groups.

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49 Ibid., p. 81.
52 Ibid., p. 4.
55 Ibid., p. 31.
Weakening the extremists’ appeal to a population, who are inclined to host and support them, is the goal. For instance, in Afghanistan, the ISAF Commander instructed his force that:

Protecting the Afghan people is the mission. The Afghan people will decide who wins this fight, and we …are in a struggle for their support. Essentially, we and the insurgents are presenting an argument for the future to the people of Afghanistan: they will decide which argument is most attractive, most convincing, and has the greatest chances of success.  

Stephen Hadley, US National Security Adviser from 2005 to 2009, explained that ‘what we need to do as a nation is to come together and put in place the tools we need both to wage the operational war and also to wage the war of ideas… We need to fight this enemy operationally, we need to fight it ideologically, in terms of our values and principles and alternative vision.’ In these interpretations, a nation-state’s values and vision form an overarching narrative for its actions against extreme Islamists.

Nation-states are historically familiar with strategic narratives. National stories have played a leading role in forming ‘imagined communities’ of shared national identity and belonging. Despite this, the prevailing view amongst contemporary state servants is to see narrative as a supporting activity in fighting extreme Islamists. UK military doctrine states ‘narrative must be preceded by strategy.’ Strategic communications is viewed as ‘simply a way to affect perceptions, attitudes and beliefs of key audiences in support of objectives’ (emphasis added). In the UK and US military, information activities are a ‘subset of support to military operations.’

Extreme Islamists have placed strategic communications in a position of primacy amongst their tools of conflict. Their ‘compelling narrative’ forms a ‘community of belief’ that can transcend national borders and tribal loyalty. A simple, over-arching and binding story provides reason and motivation for the sacrifices made towards a common goal; it also provides guidance to groups who are not readily in touch with each other, dispersed by geography or because they are being hunted by authorities. The extremists’ hopes to secure popular support are invested in the credibility and attractiveness of their story.

Commentaries have identified that ‘Al-Qaeda …and other jihadi organizations are …subordinating their military operations to a well-crafted information campaign designed to exploit certain cultural and religious values.’ These observations,

61 Echevarria II, op. cit., p. viii.  
prevalent amongst US military-academic discussions, have led to suggestions that those government agencies charged with national security have something to learn from the extremist. As Kilcullen puts it:

We typically design physical operations first, then craft supporting information operations to explain our actions. This is the reverse of al-Qaida’s approach. For all our professionalism, compared to the enemy’s, our public information is an afterthought. In military terms, for al-Qaida the ‘main effort’ is information; for us, information is a supporting effort.

An emerging school sees the information conflict as leading the assault on the credibility of extreme Islamists amongst contested populations. Ironically using language associated with directing munitions, some in the US military suggest that now the ‘main “fire” is informational.’ More boldly: ‘The use of the information element of power is primary…and the focus becomes more on strategic effects than on tactical combat’ or ‘new war-winning imperatives – to attract people rather than simply compel adversaries – greatly expand the role of information and perception management, which become primary aspects of the fight’. This school has understood the full impact of the revolution in information technology; that strategic narrative should be the primary driver of activity; it is the strategy. In this modern conflict of persuasion, it is no longer a case of whose army is most powerful, but whose story is most compelling.

Accepting the primacy of narrative has implications for the structure and organisational culture of those who adopt this approach. The strength of a strategic narrative rests partly in its resonance with its audience and partly on the ability of those narrating to live up to it. It needs to account for the understanding that ‘people from different cultures and backgrounds do not necessarily give an equal amount of credence to the same kinds of evidence.’ The challenge is to accommodate the perspectives of different audiences, including domestic ones, and provide a narrative that is credible to all.

The ability of the state to understand the attraction of extreme Islamists to contested audiences is questioned by the Chairman of the US Chiefs of Staff - ‘We’ve come to believe that messages are something we can launch downrange like a rocket, something we can fire for effect. They are not. Good communications runs both

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65 Collings & Rohozinski, op. cit., p. 16.
66 Ibid., p. 3.
67 Ibid., p. 9.
69 Echevarria II, op cit, p. 6.
70 Ibid., p. 38.
Convincing strategic narratives will be derived from state structures that are ‘better listeners’, able to root strategic communications in local realities and exploit all their repositories of knowledge to understand the appeal of the opposing story. It is often government’s junior figures who are best positioned to ‘listen’ to local realities such as tactical commanders, representatives with indigenous forces, embassy staff, domestic government officers dealing with asylum seekers and diasporas etc. Therefore, employees in roles close to extremism and their host populations are as important to shaping strategic narrative as the capital-based senior strategic communications committee. Allowing junior government servants to enter a debate of free contribution in the formulation of their strategic narrative would be challenging for nation-state hierarchies, demanding agility and adaptability, but may be possible through some form of pan-government ‘blog-type’ discussion.

The UK’s fight against the global spread of communist ideology in the early years of the Cold War provides an example of how a nation has formulated and disseminated a compelling strategic narrative against extremism. The Information Research Department (IRD) was the coordinating authority in Whitehall’s Cold-War strategic communications apparatus. By 1953, it was one of the largest departments in the UK’s Foreign Office with its own global staff. The IRD searched for material that would ‘expose, damage and help defeat the Communists and encourage anti-communists by illustrating the frauds, deficiencies and drawbacks of communism’. It disseminated this material to government representatives and influential figures in civil society in a form that helped them to compete against Soviet propaganda.

The Cold War has been described as ‘the apogee of the twentieth-century struggle for hearts and minds…by its very nature a global propaganda conflict, the alternative to real war.’ Although UK’s experience in fighting Soviet communism and extreme Islamism are historically either side of a revolution in digital information, the IRD offers some lessons that can be drawn across this gap to help address current challenges.

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71 Mullen, op. cit., p. 4.
73 Mackay and Tatham, op. cit., p. 31.
74 Foreign Office to HM Representatives, circular telegram number 6, 23 January 1948, cited in ibid, p. 80.
76 The IRD passed its material to officials of more than 50 governments and public opinion formers in 60 countries. Amongst other material, it produced a weekly ‘Digest’ in different languages with a circulation of 2,000 and special commissioned articles and publications. The IRD provided support to book publishing such as George Orwell’s Animal Farm and 1984 and supported intellectuals such as Leonard Schapiro and Bertrand Russell. See Defty, ‘Britain, America and Anti-Communist Propaganda 1945-53’ op. cit.
The Chairman of the US JCS’s comment in Washington D.C. that US strategic communications needs to ‘listen’ better implies that a nation-state also needs to be able to adjust its strategic narrative in light of evidence that it is creating an unintended and undesirable effect. Revision of the narrative is seen to be essential by those already dealing with extremist influence at the local level. In the words of a US information officer: ‘So you might have had your message, but if it wasn’t the right message, discipline and compliance are not the order of the day. Revision is the order of the day’.  

Strategic narrative will be most effective when it is consistent. Commenting on US policy in Iraq, a senior military officer noted: ‘in the eyes of the indigenous population …they see a path that is not walked straight. They see someone approaching them and changing directions. And so they are not sure what to expect….’. Attempts to create separate messages for different audiences will not survive scrutiny in the new global information environment where a ‘phrase crafted for Kansas is heard in Kandahar’.  

The compelling narrative has to be a single narrative - ‘you must make sure that you say the same thing even if you say it in different languages or using different words. You want to avoid saying one thing to one person and one thing to another…purely domestic discourse can spill over into the foreign battlespace and create detrimental strategic effect’. However, a preference for providing different stories to different audiences is still implied in UK military doctrine. Media observers with a regular relationship with the UK government talk of ‘confusion’ between the policies of DFiD, the MOD and the FCO over what to say to whom in their communications. It has been described as a ‘fragmentation’ between different branches of government defying the ability of ‘different stakeholders to form a coherent and co-ordinated strategy’. Different institutional approaches to communications, whether they be military concepts of information warfare or foreign policy concepts of public diplomacy also hamper effectiveness.  

Developing the narrative is a necessity of good strategic communications, recognising that the most penetrating arguments will not be obtained on first assessment, but will come by government servants gaining more experience of the opposing narrative as they engage with contested audiences. However, formulating a strategic narrative based on a collective understanding of the extremists’ attractiveness to their audiences is difficult for hierarchical and departmentalised government structures to achieve.  

77 Collings & Rohozinski, op. cit., p. 52.  
78 Ibid. p. 32.  
80 Collings & Rohozinski, op. cit., p. 44.  
81 UK Joint Doctrine Publication 3-40, p 3-8, para 314: ‘Commanders should explain the purpose of their presence and develop an appropriate narrative for each audience’.  
82 Christina Lamb, journalist, in Albany Associates Conference Report, op. cit., p. 4.  
84 Brown, pp. 87-89.  
85 Albany Associates, op. cit., p. 10.  
86 Ibid., p. 2.
Liberating The Many Small Voices Of Government To Compete

To compete with extreme Islamists, as many voices as possible need to be heard in opposition to them. Those voices need to speak with agility, credibility and consistency in support of a single compelling strategic narrative that will unpick the extremist’s logic. Beyond formulating the strategic narrative and internalising it, government should free its servants to compete in the global information environment.

In the context of a discussion about the changing nature of conflict, Lawrence Freedman suggests ‘a strategic narrative that helps with the appreciation of a situation and suggests courses of action can act almost as a substitute for normal command and control. So long as a …particular analysis is accepted, then there is no need to issue orders.’ 87 Although he makes this proposition in regard to military forces conducting irregular warfare, the idea of activity without orders and control, only strategic narrative as direction, offers a template for acting boldly in the information conflict.

Gowing offers the following advice on liberalising government communications:

Don’t view the new real-time information realities as a threat but an opportunity……promote both a comfortable understanding of the new dynamic and a psychological retooling as forces for enhancing careers, not destroying them…Ensure it is understood that empowerment and devolution of responsibility are a career enhancer ….Shed the instincts of hierarchy and the need for executive control from the highest level. Have professional confidence in those employed at all levels. They must be encouraged to search rapidly for basic relevant data relating to a crisis, and then have the confidence to use it in a timely way to join the crowded post-crisis information space….devolve responsibility for handling real-time information to lower levels…They should be well trained and granted enhanced levels of empowerment. This will allow far more timely responses that can…compete on comparable terms in the ‘race for space.’88

In US military discussions, junior officers have expressed frustration at being constrained in their freedom to manoeuvre in the information conflict. A US Information Officer commented on his Iraq experience that ‘As a subordinate…..who do we go to when we see an opportunity at the tactical level for a strategic benefit? So [sic] that we can reinforce the message or change the message to be more agile, based on something that is happening in my area of operations?’89 Another asks about entering the media fray at tactical level: ‘where is somebody who understands the second or third order effects of me going in and doing these things. How do I get that vision to the tactical level? You tell me: I don’t know’90 The US debate has now crystallized into proposals:

88 Gowing, ‘Skyful of Lies’, op. cit., p. 81. See also International Crisis Group, op. cit., p. 3, which recommends devolution of responsibility to ground-based personnel for reacting in the media to controversial incidents.
89 Collings & Rohozinski, op. cit., p. 57.
90 Ibid., p. 56.
The ability to compete in the ‘battle for the narrative’ in the public domain is an essential task for which more officers will need to be educated and trained in strategic communications, understanding that their role in this endeavour may be as important to the success or failure of American policy as is their skill with executing combined arms operations against the enemy. Tactical level leaders will have the most current knowledge about their operations and will be best suited to respond to developing situations that can shape the narrative. They should be authorised to speak about their operations and U.S. objectives in ‘lay language’ and in place of central headquarters public affairs officers who are often far removed from the theatres of action. The ability to counter the enemy narrative will depend in large part on those operating in the field, to understand how acts could be perceived or recast by others.91

The importance of soldiers’ voices in the global debate is also entering US senior military decision-making. In May 2009 a US military instruction was passed to its soldiers that the US Force in Afghanistan ‘values, supports and encourages communication by service members with their families and friends around the world. Troops’ individual experiences in Afghanistan, perceptions on deployment and personal views about their contribution to US-For-A’s mission are invaluable.’92 The instruction then provided the parameters for these soldiers’ individual communications to act as a form of influence in support of the mission.

If a compelling narrative is to be delivered by government in the ‘mass’ required, most levels of its system need to engage in the information conflict. The potential junior voices which are available to do this are considerable, including soldiers, officers, junior diplomatic staff, development officers, community liaison officers, university students joining government service, any government servant who has family connections with communities facing extremist instability and many more.

Educated to engage confidently and respectfully with the global information environment, these junior voices have the potential to gain a credibility that eludes their seniors; the latter have to contend with a media world in which ‘the voices of authority are challenged’ automatically.93 Younger, more diverse members of the UK state structure have the potential to engage elements of contested populations that have so far been untouched by government communications. A permanent non-institutionalised debate can also develop amongst these junior ‘information competitors’ that will help government to ‘listen’ to the opposing narrative, understand its appeal and inform itself how to hone its narrative ahead of the extremists.94

92 Michael Stopford, NATO Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Strategic Communications Services, ‘Strategic Communications Today and Tomorrow’, Lecture to the Royal College of Defence Studies, Brussels, 24 March 2010.
93 Ibid.
94 Ibid.
Conclusion

The information environment will continue to change dramatically as a result of new and cheap technologies. Television, the internet and mobile digital transmission of words and images have become political instruments as the printing press did before them. They have allowed everybody to become a pamphleteer and when collectively organised an information ministry - in the ‘Age of Democratic Information we are all witnesses today and we are all journalists today’. Control of this environment is hopeless and those institutions that attempt it are destined to clumsiness and to being outnumbered and outmanoeuvred by quicker, louder voices.

The experience of extreme Islamist organisations has been one of dispersed, fugitive groups bonded together by a common belief; a compelling narrative. Understanding strategic narrative to be the primary tool of conflict, they have become ready exploiters of the modern information environment. Their words and actions are servants to their story without daily orders being required.

The UK and US government structures tasked with defending their states against extreme Islamism have reacted defensively to the new information environment. They have sought tighter control on their institutions’ contact with it by imposing rules and by building a new ‘class’ within their ranks of communications officers. Another trade amongst many, their growth demonstrates that government has an understanding of the importance that communications play in the conflict against extremists, but not its primacy. This approach provides moments of superiority in the information conflict, but never achieves the consistent deluge of information and interpretation that can compete with the extremists.

The UK government has the potential to transform itself into an offensive body against extreme Islamist manipulation of the information domain by activating a multitude of junior voices. However, these voices need to be empowered by training, confident of their government’s compelling narrative and emboldened by an institutional culture that urges them to fight the information conflict without being hampered by recourse to higher authority. This freedom to act will create the ‘mass’ of voices required to better fill the digital information space with truth and provide a proactive engagement with the media of all backgrounds all the time, including an instant response to extremist propaganda.

From these changes UK government servants will emerge, who will view their appointment as soldier, diplomat, development officer or otherwise to be a supporting role to the global communications conflict. They will seek to know and understand the UK strategic narrative, contribute to the analysis that creates and improves it and use it as direction for their planning and activity. They must have the confidence that the rest of government shares the same narrative and that it is being projected with a consistency that the opposition argument cannot undermine. They will also understand that learning how to compete in the new global information environment must surpass their knowledge of more traditional aspects of conflict.

96 Stopford, op. cit.
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