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“DRAMATISING” COUNTER-IDEOLOGY

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There are still many untapped means to reach out to the larger community on the dangers of violent extremism. One of these is the production of a drama series for television which can also be distributed in CD format.

GOVERNMENTS in recent years have shifted their strategies to tackling terrorism. As force alone is seldom enough, the tough stance has given way to the soft approach. Fashioned in various terms and packages – such as de-radicalisation, rehabilitation and re-education -- this soft approach is fast gaining currency in many countries.

The above effort, however, addresses only the violent extremists who constitute merely a small minority of the whole society. To strategically succeed in defusing the threat of terrorism, governments need to also vary the target audience in communicating counter-ideology -- that is, by addressing and inoculating the larger segment of the society.

Why the larger community?

There are two reasons why efforts to address the larger audience should be intensified although they themselves are not the violent extremists. First, by understanding the threat well enough, they will be more receptive to the initiatives of the governments and institutions in defusing the threat of terrorism. Second, by understanding the workings of this erroneous ideology, they will be more prepared to face its challenges, and therefore be participative in communicating counter-ideology to others.

Accordingly, public education via various platforms has been carried out to explain the true message of Islam and to properly situate the idea of jihad. While these efforts should be applauded, some means are still under-explored. There is need to reframe the public education strategy to identify a possible creative platform in communicating counter-ideology. Counter-ideology should tap on this platform as a subtle, yet effective approach in further disseminating its message, to reach its targeted audience, by leaps and bounds.

Public Education Strategy

In framing the public education campaign initiated by governments and institutions in countering violent extremism, it can be viewed from three different perspectives, namely of informing, educating, and engaging.

Informing the community is accomplished through audio-visual media platforms to potentially reach the largest number of audience in the shortest time possible -- that is, through television and radio. Reality TV, drama series and documentaries are examples of content in this medium. This platform, until this moment, is greatly under-utilised in communicating counter-ideology.

Secondly, educating the community (online or offline) is through the medium of written materials such as books, working papers and commentaries. This task is shouldered by research institutions specializing in international studies, notably political violence and terrorism research.

Thirdly, engaging the community is more focused on the medium of public events and engagements -- that is, through seminars, dialogues, workshops, sermons and forums. In Singapore, these are usually initiated by Muslim and grassroots organisations. On the other hand, *asatizah* (religious teachers) have also been active in their Friday sermons and public forums in educating the public the true picture of Islam.

Why TV?

Apparently, the use of the TV medium has not been optimised although it has the largest possible reach of audience in the shortest possible time. By appealing to the senses and emotions, it is a powerful medium in breaking down complex concepts into simple doses of audio-visual actualisation. Furthermore, this medium easily resonates with viewers who are not motivated to read publications in counter-ideology or those who shun Islamic social events and congregations.

Why Drama?

The campaign against terrorism launched thus far on TV is minimal. Brief clips are shown on screens guiding one on what to (and not to) do when a threat of terror may be imminent. These are seasonally screened in train stations. This effort, however small, is necessary to create initial awareness.

To create strategic awareness, however, a high-impact initiative should follow. To be successful, a social marketing campaign has to reach people with a message that will help them decide to change their behaviour, or at least convince them to the extent that it creates in them the urge to share the experience and talk about it with others. This is usually achieved through movies and dramas where the good ones will leave the audience talking about them long after they have finished watching them. This is exactly what is lacking in communicating counter-ideology. Politicians and researchers may not reach the audience that the movies and dramas can reach.

Admittedly, drama as a means of informing the public is not a stand-alone. But it is still one of the best platforms that make people start thinking, talking and doing. Surprisingly, this alternative is not seen to be initiated even on an international level. Movies on violent extremism in Hollywood, for example, are mainly depicting “entertaining violence”, and not exploiting the market to produce compelling “intellectual movies” in countering the ideology of violent extremists.

Precedents

In the last few years, in Singapore, the drama strategy was used to depict social issues and presenting possible solutions to the problems. Examples of programmes employing this strategy are *Hanyut* (Adrift), *Rahsia Perkahwinan* (Secrets of Marriage) and *Kau Istimewa* (You Are Special).

Hanyut, a popular Malay docu-drama series commissioned by the Ministry of Culture Youth and Sports, explores the contemporary problems of Malay youth. Although the movie was criticized for framing subjects in a negative light, the series attracted a very large audience, mainly due to its engaging theme. Interestingly, a spin-off was floated in the form of hotlines for youths to share their problems by phone.

Likewise, *Rahsia Perkahwinan*, a social drama commissioned by the Media Development Authority, attained high viewership. This drama, which focuses on family issues, provides alternatives in managing problems and conflicts. *Kau Istimewa*, an award-winning series commissioned by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis), which attained recognition in the International Film and Video Festival, portrays the plight of the poor in Singapore, highlighting their progressive journey away from poverty.

Going Beyond Existing Platforms

In conclusion, relevant government agencies need to go beyond the existing platforms used. This is by collaborating with production companies to commission quality drama series to help enhance public awareness of counter ideology.

The content to be used is not lacking; for example, the booklet titled “*Don’t be Extreme in Your Religion*” co-published by Muis and the Malay civic organization, Perdaus. It educates the community on the workings of violent extremist ideology and suggests preventive steps to take to protect an individual from falling into its trap. What is lacking are entertaining ways to spread the message.

Existing guidelines on the non-permissibility of airing religious programmes in the media should not be a hindrance to this proposition. There are various ways in presenting the intended message, such as from a larger social perspective. This is best left to the creativity of production companies in shaping the voice of the programme.

A good TV programme, as well as other means of outreach such as CDs, can have a wider ripple effect. They can be used as educational materials in schools, madrasahs and mosques. This would be a strategic effort in countering terrorism. It will be a critical contribution to the global campaign in the war of ideas against the misled community of violent extremists.

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