RSIS COMMENTARIES

Counter Ideology:
Role of Media Relations

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Muslim self-help groups doing counter ideological work play an important role. However, the work could be boosted with more support from the mainstream media. A group of journalists share their views on how self-help groups should relate to the media to forge greater cooperation in inoculating the public from extremist propaganda.

Reaching out to the Media

What makes news depends on the value of the news – does it have impact, and to what degree? The more drama and conflict are involved, especially casualties, the greater the value of the news. It is not surprising then that statements issued by extremists receive wide media coverage; so much so that media outlets are often blamed for being the conduit of extremists' messages. This raises the question of how to counter the extremists' unchallenged use of the media. To demand the media to stop covering extremists' statements may not be practical. To complement them with counter-views though, would provide a balance that could neutralise the implications of the extremists'views.

Counter-extremist practitioners must be as active as the extremists in courting the media. The media is not giving its space to the extremists, the extremists are proactively taking it, so must the counteracting side. This is especially important for self-help counter ideology groups. Self-help groups usually lack an understanding of strategic communications; they tend to be passive and wait for the media to approach them. Their weak distribution network does not enable them to create a "buzz" around their activities that would create media interest. These groups need to understand the media cycle, how to present their information in a compelling way, and how to proactively court the media.

The best way to understand the media is to work with professionals with deep knowledge of the industry, and a commitment to understanding counter-ideology work. To gain some insights on how to address this critical issue, we spoke to seven journalists. They are: Azahar Mohamed, M. Noor, Chairul Fahmy, Syed Zakir Hussain, Zackaria Abdul Rahim, Ahmad Dhafeer and Mazlena Mazlan, all from Singapore Press Holding and Mediacorp. Unanimous on the need for a strong relationship between the two parties, they all stressed the importance of confidence building and the maintenance of relations that transcends 'the immediate need'.

Building Confidence

Self-help groups involved in counter ideological work need to demonstrate their credibility to assist the media in accurately covering this issue in an objective way. According to Zackaria, some critical questions need to be addressed, such as "Whose ideology you're countering? For what reason? Why is one ideology more "correct" than the other?" Once that is done, people will want to understand the likely impact of the effort. To this end, suggests Chairul Fahmy, sharing information about the efforts should not be restricted to stories about success or 'positive stories' only. Media reporting on failures, if done in a factual and responsible manner, would contribute to the public's greater understanding of the tasks at hand. It will encourage greater understanding that "counter terrorism threats are no mean feat and that by sharing these failures, there will be people within the community who can share good advice or ideas, and suggestions". This way, confidence in counter ideological work is developed both in the media and the public.

One hindrance to good organisation-media relations is the stereotypical perception held by organisations that the media is always looking for "tabloid-type" stories only. In reality, the media is not just looking for gory and dramatic pictures, but is trying to understand what is happening so as to be able to inform its audience. Good open communication is critical. Chairul Fahmy commented: "It's important to overcome this habit of questioning the integrity of the press men and try to avoid the cliché of saying, almost everything, 'off-the-record'." They are of the view that both parties should view each other as committed honest professionals.

Sustaining Good Relations

Building such a relationship with the media should not be a one-off programme but a continuous effort. Among other measures that could be taken, Zakir, Zackaria, M. Noor and Chairul Fahmy stress the need for self-help bodies to invite journalists to their events and have discussions so as to provide them with a better understanding of their work, position and views on various issues as well as share important findings from their research.

The writers believe that good media relations would facilitate counter-extremist messages to the larger audience. For example, media requests for interviews should not be ignored. Accessibility for interview beyond the usual working hours also helps to accommodate the nature of media work. Unavailability for interviews must be courteously communicated; journalists understand that interviewees are busy, but being rude or ignoring requests creates unnecessary hostility and mistrust. To assist in managing media requests, having a trained corporate communications officer would be helpful. One interesting suggestion was offered by Azahar who suggested a media attachment programme for self-help groups so that they can understand the media cycle and how to work with it.

Writing for the Media

Fighting for media space depends not only on good media relations, but also on being relevant to the media's focus. "Be proactive, but not excessive", says Zackaria. One example of pro-activeness, the writers suggest, is to anticipate requests especially of significant incidents when the media would often seek comments from the ground. However, all the journalists agree that the content must be media-friendly. "Sending press releases without understanding what is really news will be a waste of time," says Azahar, who argues for proper training.

Empathy

A structured 'to-do list' for self-help groups in their efforts to build media relations is only a small part. The main theme however is empathy. Like all other skills required in building individual or

organisational relations, one has to be emphatic of the other to understand each other's role. In this case, self-help groups have to ultimately perceive the media as people who are just trying to do their jobs. If both sides understand the strengths and weaknesses of each other then the substance of the relationship can be strengthened, resulting in a more effective outreach to the community in counter-ideological work.

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