
NEW COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGIES AND WINNING THE WAR ON TERROR

BY EDWARD HEARST*

In winning the war on terror, the West has the option of confronting radical Islam with what it fears most, access for the citizens of Islamic nations to a free flow of ideas and information. One of the best weapons we have at our disposal is an aggressive and calculated use of the World Wide Web.

Supporters of radical Islam attack the West in part because they fear the people they seek as adherents will find the ideas, rights, culture or practices in the West more attractive than what the extremists are preaching. This is the real clash of civilizations, one that radical Islam is losing. Even in friendly Islamic countries like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, traditional or theocratically focused educational systems create the basis for confrontation between civilizations. Controlled presses that publish false or misleading information about the West fan the flames of hatred.

Recent technological developments give us the opportunity to change all this. The U.S. and its allies now have an opportunity to reach opinion leaders and the people more broadly in many Islamic nations. This is a result of the unprecedented spread of content and number of users on the World Wide Web, new and inexpensive distribution technologies, and new software innovations that allow secure communications.

New distribution technologies can make the Web widely available. Satellites can now enable people anywhere in the world to access the Internet through a dish similar to that used for satellite television. New wireless web technologies are such as Wi-Fi or Ultra-Wideband allow very low cost wireless networks.

New developments in software are also having a significant impact on this equation. One fear of potential Web users in the Islamic world is that oppressive governments or religious police will block access to unapproved information or even take action against those who seek out or discuss new ideas. There are now Web technologies that allow users overseas to surf web pages anonymously. There are also companies that serve as middlemen between the end user and a web site and encrypt information to and from a users' computer. Pretty Good Privacy (PGP) is an encryption technology that allows private communications via e-mail between two users who have installed PGP and have access to a secret key.

The result of these new developments is that Internet can be used to undermine the hatred, ignorance, and distortions of radical Islam that help provide the recruits, finance and political support for terrorism. Something similar was done in the Cold War through an earlier technology, radio. Radio Free Europe and the Voice of America played a critical role in undermining Communism behind the Iron Curtain.

A key question facing policy makers is whether the West will take a passive approach with respect to

promoting a free flow of ideas, or whether it will take a proactive approach as it did in the Cold War. When the Defense Department recently floated the idea of creating an office to put forward its take on events, it was immediately shot down in the press as a propaganda office.

This new form of public diplomacy is an innovative way for the U.S. to implement an offensive information warfare strategy. Such a strategy could include tactics already in the arsenal. For example, the U.S. and its allies can create and support targeted Web sites and chat rooms to make available the views of moderate Islamic scholars, thus providing information useful to those who might want to challenge the radicals.

We can also combat the negative impact of government-inspired newspapers and television in much of the Islamic world which fan hatred of the West by translating and posting on the Web objective newspaper articles both from sources in Islamic nations and the Western press. Translating and organizing existing stories will not create the same political firestorm, and will have more credibility, as having the government write the stories.

The U.S. can support the creation of Web sites that "out" or expose those individuals, charities or companies that financially or politically support radical Islam in a way we could not do officially as a government. These could be interactive sites where people can anonymously enter information in chat rooms and bulletin boards.

Congress can also mandate that our international aid and financing programs be used to promote the distribution networks and infrastructure to expand access to the Web in countries where radical Islam has made inroads.

Using new technologies to promote our national security interests is also consistent with our fundamental principles of promoting democracy overseas. It is time for our government to use the technological and informational resources our democratic, free market system has created.

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