



COMMUNICATION, DEVELOPMENT AND... COUNTER TERRORISM

Gordon Adam



How can participative communication approaches inform the prevention of radicalisation leading to violent extremism in Pakistan? Gordon Adam discusses how he drew on the ideas of participants in Malmö University's Master in Communication for Development to inform Media Support Solutions' recommendations to the British Government on a sensitive subject.

One of the privileges of holding an annual workshop on media and conflict at Malmö University's Masters Course in Communication for Development (ComDev) is that I can tap into participants' ideas from all over the world that can be relevant to my current work. Past workshops have addressed communication responses to the tsunami, the humanitarian disaster in Darfur and peace building in Afghanistan. This year, the theme was counter terrorism in Pakistan.

This is a sensitive subject for many development and media professionals who are not in the business of "messaging", "spin", or - dare I say it - propaganda. Using the media to propagate a point of view in as highly polarised a situation as Pakistan is, they would say, asking for trouble: people could all too easily identify the messengers as agents of the British or American Governments who are combatants in neighbouring Afghanistan. This in turn devalues the message, and tarnishes any developmental value that the communications campaign might otherwise have had. Yes, radicalisation leading to violent extremism is deeply worrying for many people, especially in Pakistan... But is this a relevant topic for ComDev?

My answer is a qualified yes. But what has made this particular piece of work particularly interesting is the current willingness of the British Government to consider new approaches. My organisation, **Media Support Solutions (MSS)**, has recently been asked by the **Department for International Development (DFID)** to look at what lessons ComDev has for **PREVENT** -the UK's much criticised strategy to tackle radicalisation of individuals and communities. Our response was

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that there are important lessons to be drawn from participative communication approaches, amongst others.

Two points are significant about this process –first, that new communications approaches are being sought, and secondly, that it is not just for DFID, but also for the Foreign, Defence and Home Ministries as well. These instances may not have fully bought into the ideas yet, but they are listening and they are communicating with each other. For civil servants and departments whose first instinct is to defend their own “turf”, this is in itself an achievement.

Applying these ideas to a particular country is a challenge. Especially a country like Pakistan, which has become deeply suspicious of “outside interference” and whose current desperate situation has increased national paranoia to new levels. Yet, MSS’s research for a follow-up piece of PREVENT work for DFID showed a picture rather more complex, and in some ways more hopeful, than the one conveyed by dismal media images. Along with the familiar extremist-fuelled violence in the North West Frontier Province and in Punjab, there is a business boom, particularly in the southern city of Karachi. What’s more, it is in the field of communication.

A few examples: profits from the newly expanding commercial radio sector have risen ten fold in the past five years. There are over 90 million cell phones in the country, increasing at the rate of one million a month, with some of the lowest call charges in Asia. Vast numbers of SMSs are being sent by all social classes, suggesting that lack of education is not a barrier to texting. About 20 million people regularly access the Internet. Investment in telecoms infrastructure so far is estimated at about \$3 billion, which has fuelled a tenfold increase in advertising revenue in the past decade.

This situation presents an opportunity to counter the successful Islamic extremist propaganda machine, which has been so adept at exploiting new media with websites, cell phones, SMSs, distribution of videos and DVDs to the furthest reaches of the country, and of course the use of illegal radio broadcasts.

Just how best this should be done was the task given to the ComDev students. Using research that had been collected in Pakistan just a few days before, four groups of students were given 24 hours to come up with a PowerPoint presentation each of four/five ideas using the full range of media. The challenge was to use participatory approaches, finding local partners and not simply resorting to a blast of

propaganda.

The emphasis on new media was all the more appropriate as this workshop was part of the most technically challenging seminar in my nine years of lecturing at Malmö. The seminar brought together fifteen students located at Malmö University (Sweden), another fifteen located in Guelph, Ontario (Canada) and another twenty attending online from all over the world. Thanks to Mikael Rundberg, the Internet-based video link between Malmö and Guelph functioned well, and even the challenge of ComDev practitioner Wendy Quarry co-presenting a lecture from Ottawa by skype was overcome. All the while, an Internet “chat” gathering the online participants was projected on the wall of the lecture room at Malmö, for everyone to see and engage with.

When the time came for the presentations of the Pakistan exercise, it all worked flawlessly from Guelph, and an online presentation was delivered from southern France by skype. Everyone could hear everyone else with apparent ease, and judging by the comments, the exercise proposed had thoroughly captured the participants’ imaginations.

The quality of the ideas presented was impressive: some mirrored the initial thoughts of my colleagues and myself, which was reassuring. Others were quite original –for instance:

- a “youth expression” initiative to discuss and disseminate ideas of violence and non-violence through innovative media channels;
- promoting respected personalities as “champions” of non-violence to back up the strong thread of peaceful protest that runs through Pakistani Pashtun society;
- promoting dialogue through songs performed by popular artists, distributed through YouTube.

Equally impressive were the ideas to engage Pakistani institutions such as the Ministry of Education through innovative training in youth leadership skills via web 2.0-based tools and to try to ensure sustainability by having the telecoms companies sponsor SMSs and other new media tools aimed at engaging with young people in an interactive, fun approach. One group laid particular emphasis on funding communications related work to occupy young people who

might otherwise be tempted into violent radicalism. The principles that this approach had to be indigenous and to build on the best ideas that are already in place as far as possible, were well understood.

Further thought is needed, particularly on practical implementation, which could be very challenging, on monitoring impact, and on analysing the risks involved for locals working on controversial issues in this very public field. But the depth of understanding shown by the participants coming to grips with this very sensitive topic for the first time was in any case surprising.

I have been aware for many years that the ComDev Master participants have a wide range of experience and expertise to offer. This is one reason that running this annual workshop is so stimulating. But this year, their thoughts on what is a burning issue have been particularly valuable, and some of them will no doubt be reflected in MSS's final recommendations to the British Government when we report at the end of April.

Gordon Adam is co-founder and Managing Director of Media Support, a Scottish based organisation working with broadcasters in Africa and Asia to use media effectively for peace-building, education and development. A recognised specialist in media and development, he has written widely on the subject, including co-authoring DFID's handbook *Working with Media in Conflicts and other Emergencies* (with A. Skuse), and *Radio and HIV/AIDS: making a difference* (with N. Harford). He has set up long-term comdev projects in Cambodia, Botswana, Mozambique and Afghanistan, and trained national broadcasters in many countries.

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