The Al-Qaeda Media Machine

Philip Seib, J.D.

صوت أسامة بن لادن

زعيم تنظيم القاعدة

Philip Seib is Professor of Journalism and Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California. He holds an A.B. from Princeton University and a J.D. from Southern Methodist University. Professor Seib has authored and edited numerous books, including Beyond the Front Lines: How the News Media Cover a World Shaped by War, *and the recently published* New Media and the New Middle East. *His next book,* The Al-Jazeera Effect: How the New Global Media Are Reshaping World Politics, *will be published in the summer of 2008.*

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PHOTO: This image grab of a photograph of Osama bin-Laden taken from Al-Jazeera television on 29 November 2007 accompanied a short audio message urging Europeans to end their involvement in Afghanistan and reiterating Bin-Laden's involvement in the September 11 attacks on the United States. (AFP PHOTO/ AL-JAZEERA/DSK)

LIKE AN AGING ROCK STAR who has dropped out of the public eye, Osama bin-Laden occasionally decides to remind people that he's still around. He makes video appearances that first appear on Arabic television channels but which the world quickly sees on television or on multiple Web sites. Bin-Laden's message is "Hey, they haven't caught me yet," which cheers up his fans, but his threats and pronouncements are mostly terrorist boilerplate. For all the parsing of his sentences and scrutinizing of the color of his beard, hardly anything in his videos helps us better understand and combat terrorism.

Meanwhile, significant Al-Qaeda media efforts go largely unnoticed by news organizations and the public. This myopia is characteristic of an approach to antiterrorism that focuses on Bin-Laden as terror-celebrity while ignoring the deep-rooted dynamism of a global enemy. Most jihadist media products make no mention of Bin-Laden, but they deserve attention because they are vital to Al-Qaeda's mission and to its efforts to extend its influence. Al-Qaeda has become a significant player in global politics largely because it has developed a sophisticated media strategy.

Lacking a tangible homeland—other than, perhaps, scattered outposts in the wilds of Waziristan—Al-Qaeda has established itself as a virtual state that communicates with its "citizens" and cultivates an even larger audience through masterful use of the media, with heavy reliance on the Internet. For every conventional video performance by Bin-Laden that appears on Al-Jazeera and other major television outlets, there are hundreds of online videos that proselytize, recruit, and train the Al-Qaeda constituency.

Growth of Media Machine

The Al-Qaeda media machine has grown steadily. Al-Qaeda and its jihadist brethren use more than 4,000 Web sites to encourage the faithful and threaten their enemies. The Al-Qaeda production company, As-Sahab, released 16 videos during 2005, 58 in 2006, and produced more than 90 in 2007. Like a Hollywood studio, As-Sahab has a carefully honed understanding of what will attract an audience and how to shape the Al-Qaeda message.

You won't get As-Sahab's videos from Netflix, but any Web user can easily find them, and the selection is wide. In 2006, the Global Islamic Media Front, an Al-Qaeda distribution arm, offered "Jihad Academy," which includes footage of attacks on U.S. troops, insurgents assembling

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improvised explosive devices (IEDs), prospective suicide bombers reading their last testaments, and general exhortations to join the war against the United States, Israel, and other foes.

Another distributor with ties to Al-Qaeda, Ansar al-Sunnah's Media Podium, produced "Top 20," a selection of filmed IED attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq "in order to encourage the jihad and the competition between the mujahideen to battle and defeat their enemy." For this greatest hits video, criteria for selection included "the degree of security conditions while filming the operation's site" and "precision in hitting the target."[1]

With the stirring music and graphic images of an action movie, the videos fortify the resolve of the Al-Qaeda faithful and, even more important, capture the attention of 15-year-olds in cyber cafes—the next generation of Al-Qaeda warriors. Al-Qaeda takes recruitment seriously, recognizing that potential martyrs require convincing that their sacrifice will be noble and worthwhile. Once inspired by the videos, the prospective jihadist might move on to a Web posting such as "How To Join Al-Qaeda," which tells him: "You feel that you want to carry a weapon, fight, and kill the occupiers . . . . Set a goal; for example, assassinating the American ambassador—is it so difficult?"[2]

Spreading the Message

As-Sahab is part of the media department Bin-Laden established when Al-Qaeda formed in 1988. The first message to emerge was that Al-Qaeda was a brave underdog facing the monstrous Soviet Union. Soon thereafter,

Al-Qaeda announced its resolve to take on other purported enemies of Islam. In 1996, Bin-Laden issued his "Declaration of War on the United States" and used the Al-Qaeda media machinery to spread the call for jihad.

Before a U.S. air strike killed him in June 2006, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the self-proclaimed head of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, took this kind of media work to a new level. He first displayed his grisly flair for using media when terrorists abducted American businessman Nicholas Berg and beheaded him in Iraq in 2004, with Zarqawi apparently the executioner. The terrorists videotaped the beheading and presented it on a Web site, from which it was copied to other sites and downloaded 500,000 times within 24 hours.[3]

The following year, Zarqawi began an online magazine, *Zurwat al-Sanam* (The Tip of the Camel's Hump, meaning ideal Islamic practice)*, which featured 43 pages of text, including stories about fallen jihadists, and photographs of Osama bin-Laden and George W. Bush.[4] Later, Zarqawi's "information wing"—which included his own online press secretary—released "All Religion Will Be for Allah," a 46-minute video with scenes including a brigade of suicide bombers in training. As *The Washington Post* reported, the video was offered on a specially designed Web page with

An undated image from a videotape produced by Al-Qaeda's As-Sahab media wing depicting a prominent Taliban military commander holding a rocket-propelled grenade launcher in an undisclosed area of Afghanistan.

many options for downloading, including Windows Media and RealPlayer versions for those with high-speed Internet connections, another version for those with dial-up, and one for downloading it to play on a cell phone.[5] Production quality has become more sophisticated, with many videos now including subtitles in several languages and some featuring 3-D animation.[6]

Al-Qaeda-related operations outside the center of the Middle East have also copied the As-Sahab look, as we can see in the Al-Qaeda organization's video productions in the Islamic Maghreb. Videos of the December 2006 attack in Algeria on a convoy of employees of Halliburton subsidiary Brown & Root-Condor and the April 2007 attacks in Algiers featured the professional technical quality of As-Sahab productions. Terrorism experts speculated that an Al-Qaeda condition for its affiliating with the North African Salafist Group for Call and Combat was an upgrade of the local group's media competency.[7]

Even cartoons depicting children as suicide bombers are easily available on the Web, and Hamas's Al-Aqsa Television has featured children's programming that extols martyrdom. On one popular program on this channel, *Pioneers of Tomorrow,* a Mickey Mouse-like character becomes a martyr when he refuses to turn over his family's land to Israelis. In another episode, the child host of the show sings, "We can defeat the colonialist army. We have regained our freedom through bloodshed and the wrath of fire. If we receive good tidings, we will meet our death with no hesitation."[8] It is hard to calculate the damage that the poisonous residue of such fare may cause over time.

Through news reports, satellite television provides Al-Qaeda and the public with graphic representations of Al-Qaeda's work and occasional glimpses of Bin-Laden himself. More significantly, the Internet supplies more detailed versions of what the news media have covered, all the while furthering operational connectivity and a sense of cohesion. Michael Scheuer observed that "the Internet today allows militant Muslims from every country to meet, talk, and get to know each other electronically, a familiarization and bonding process that in the 1980s and early 1990s required a trip to Sudan, Yemen, Afghanistan, or Pakistan."[9] As author Gabriel Weimann noted, *Sawt al-Jihad (Voice of Jihad),* an Al-Qaeda online magazine,

reflects the multiple purposes of such ventures: "Orchestrating attacks against Western targets is important, but the main objective remains that of mobilizing public support and gaining grassroots legitimacy among Muslims."[10]

Training Opportunities

A further aspect of this effort to build a Web-based constituency is an online library of training materials explaining how to mix ricin poison, how to build a bomb using commercial chemicals, how to sneak through Syria and into Iraq, and other such advice. Experts who answer questions on message boards and chat rooms support some of these items.

Another Al-Qaeda online magazine, *Muaskar al-Battar* (Camp of the Sword)*,* underscored the value of online instruction: "Oh Mujahid brother, in order to join the great training camps you don't have to travel to other lands. Alone in your home or with a group of your brothers, you too can begin to execute the training program."[11] To enhance cyber security for such connections, the online *Technical Mujahid Magazine* was begun in late 2006 to instruct its readers about electronic data security and other high-tech matters.

During the past few years, the online training curriculum has expanded to include small-unit infantry tactics and intelligence operations such as collecting data, recruiting members of state security services, and setting up phone taps. Readers have downloaded this material in places such as Australia, Canada, Germany, Great Britain, and Morocco, and it has turned up when law enforcement raided cells in those countries. Some intelligence experts argue that online training has its limits—that technical skills and tradecraft require more than Web-based instruction. But although Al-Qaeda's students might be able to glean only rudimentary knowledge from Internet sources, it is enough to make them dangerous.[12]

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Information Operations

The Al-Qaeda leadership has stressed Internet use in directives to its citizens/followers, as was illustrated in this message carried on one of its Web sites:

> Due to the advances of modern technology, it is easy to spread news, information, articles, and other information over the Internet. We strongly urge Muslim Internet professionals to spread and disseminate news and information about the Jihad through e-mail lists, discussion groups, and their own Web sites. If you fail to do this, and our site closes down before you have done this, we may hold you to account before Allah on the Day of Judgment . . . . We expect our Web site to be opened and closed continuously. Therefore, we urgently recommend to any Muslims that are interested in our material to copy all the articles from our site and disseminate them through their own Web sites, discussion boards, and e-mail lists. This is something that any Muslim can participate in easily, including sisters. This way, even if our sites are closed down, the material will live on with the Grace of Allah.[13]

This appreciation of the value of the Internet is nothing new for Al-Qaeda. Even when under attack by U.S. forces in late 2001, Al-Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan clung to their high-tech tools. A Pakistani journalist who was on the scene wrote that while retreating, "every second Al-Qaeda member was carrying a laptop computer along with his Kalashnikov."[14]

The Internet allows access to an almost infinite array of information providers and is attractive for other reasons, as well. For terrorist organizations, the Internet is preferable to satellite television because it provides unmatched opportunities to reach a global audience with video productions without having to rely on any particular television channels. In addition, using the Internet avoids problems associated with distribution of a physical product. Instead of establishing clearing houses to mail videos—a process that law enforcement agencies were able to disrupt—these groups now rely on pirated video-editing software and Web sites onto which material may be uploaded for their followers to access. These sites feature items such as the 118-page "Comprehensive Security Encyclopedia," which was posted in 2007 with detailed instructions about improving Internet and telephone security, purchasing weapons, handling explosives, transferring funds to jihadist groups, and other useful hints.[15]

One of the masters of this craft was Younis Tsouli, a young Moroccan whose *nom de cyber-guerre* was "Irhabi007." Based in England, Tsouli provided technical skills needed by Al-Qaeda after it left Afghanistan and established an online headquarters. He assisted Zarqawi when he used the Internet as part of his war plan in Iraq. Tsouli was adroit at hacking into servers that he then used to distribute large video files. (One of his hacking victims was the computer system of the Arkansas Highway and Transportation Department.)

Arrested in London in 2005 and sent to prison by a British court in 2007, Tsouli understood the effectiveness of the Internet in reaching potential recruits for Al-Qaeda's cause. The 2006 U.S. *National Intelligence Estimate* acknowledged the importance of this: "The radicalization process is occurring more quickly, more widely, and more anonymously in the Internet age, raising the likelihood of surprise attacks by unknown groups whose members and supporters may be difficult to pinpoint."[16]

By mid-2007, some Al-Qaeda-related Web sites were broadening their agendas. "Media jihad" included entering online forums with large American audiences in order to influence "the views of the weak-minded American" who "is an idiot and does not know where Iraq is." The "weak-minded" were to be targeted with videos showing U.S. troops under fire and with false messages purportedly from American Soldiers and their families lamenting their involvement in the Iraq war. At the same time, Web forums for Islamist audiences featured information gleaned from Western news reports, such as poll results showing lack of public support for the war and, occasionally, information about weapons systems that news stories published.

Worldwide Recruiting

Beyond the material directly addressing warfare, such Web sites devote some of their content to ideological and cultural issues that are at the heart of efforts to win the support of young Muslims. Because Al-Qaeda's leaders believe this will be a long war, they see appealing to prospective jihadists

and enlarging their ranks as crucial to their eventual success. The number of English-language jihadist sites has been growing, with approximately 100 available as vehicles for militant Islamic views. Some of these operate overtly. In October 2007, the *New York Times* profiled a 21-year-old Saudi-born American living in North Carolina whose blog extols Bin-Laden's view of the world. He includes videos designed to appeal to North American and European Muslims who are angry about the Iraq war and are responsive to claims that Islam is under siege.

This blogger had apparently not violated any U.S. laws, so he continued his online efforts, reaching—he claimed—500 regular readers. Although some law enforcement officials want to shut down such sites and prosecute their proprietors, some terrorism experts propose that such sites be allowed to operate in public view because they may provide insights into terrorist thinking and operations.[17]

Al-Qaeda's recruiting efforts have targeted British and American Muslims, such as a 2006 video that described rapes and murders allegedly committed by U.S. Soldiers in Iraq. Released to mark the first anniversary of the 7/7 bombings in London, the video featured Bin-Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri; Shehzad Tanweer, one of the London bombers, who died during the attack; and Adam Gadahn, also known as "Azzam the American," who grew up in California.

Tanweer, delivering his final testament in English with a Yorkshire accent, said: "We are 100 percent committed to the cause of Islam. We love death the way you love life. . . . Oh, Muslims of Britain, you, day in and day out on your TV sets, watch and hear about the oppression of the Muslims, from the east to the west. But yet you turn a blind eye, and carry on with your lives as if you never heard anything,

or as if it does not concern you. . . . Oh, Muslims of Britain, stand up and be counted. . . . Fight against the disbelievers, for it is an obligation made on you by Allah." To this, Gadahn added, "It's crucial for Muslims to keep in mind that the American, the British, and the other members of the coalition of terror have intentionally targeted Muslim civilians."[18]

Among more recent videos aimed at a U.S. audience is "To Black Americans," which features Zawahiri criticizing Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice and introducing video clips of Malcolm X talking about the unfair treatment of African-Americans. (These video clips date back to the Vietnam War years.) This video resembles Cold War-era communist propaganda, and it does not appear to have caused much of a stir, but it gives some indication of where Al-Qaeda's propaganda efforts are heading.

Terrorist organizations see young Muslims in non-Islamic countries as likely prospects for recruitment, and so they use media tools to stoke anger about purported economic and political discrimination. Al-Qaeda is apparently trying to create an online community where members of the Muslim diaspora will feel at home. Once they are part of this "community," they can view a steady stream of jihadist messages of varying degrees of subtlety.

Al-Qaeda recognizes the value of developing online networks. Chris Zambelis wrote, "The Internet enables like-minded militants to associate and communicate anonymously in cyber social networks. This process reinforces their sense of purpose and duty and encourages solidarity with the greater cause."[19] Extending such efforts beyond an Arabic-speaking core of support is a crucial part of Al-Qaeda's expansion.

YouTube and other such sites make videos like "To Black Americans" easily available, which differentiates today's propaganda from its antecedents during the Cold War and earlier. It can reach a

global audience instantly. Just how big that audience really is remains open to question, but as Al-Qaeda increases its video production output, it seems to be operating on the theory that at least some of its messages will reach their desired viewers.

During the second half of 2007, U.S. forces in Iraq shut down at least a half-dozen Al-Qaeda media outposts in that country. One house the U.S. raided in Samarra contained 12 computers, 65 hard drives, and a film studio. The American military effort to halt such media operations relied in part on the belief of General David Petraeus that "the war is not only being fought on the ground in Iraq but also in cyberspace."[20] Petraeus's concern relates to an issue raised in U.S. Army and Marine Corps Field Manual, *Counterinsurgency*—insurgents attempt to shape the information environment to their advantage by using suicide attacks and other such tactics to "inflate perceptions of insurgent capabilities."[21]

Cyberspace Warfare

Information dominance is a modern warfare tenet that is increasingly important, particularly if conventional military strength accompanies the effective exercise of soft power. Al-Qaeda understands the limitations of its own use of "hard power"—the

coercive force of terrorist attacks—and continues to expand its conceptual approach to information warfare. Recognizing the pervasiveness of the information delivered by satellite television and the Internet and the influence of news organizations ranging from the BBC to Al-Jazeera, Al-Qaeda is now offering, in the words of Michael Scheuer, "a reliable source of near real-time news coverage from the jihad fronts for Muslims." From Iraq and Afghanistan, wrote Scheuer, Iraqi insurgents and Taliban forces produce, on an almost daily basis, combat videos, interviews with their commanders, and graphic footage of retaliatory measures against locals who cooperate with American or U.S.-backed forces.[22]

This effort reflects Al-Qaeda's dissatisfaction with Arab news organizations as vehicles for its media products. Zawahiri has criticized Al-Jazeera, in particular, because it refused to be a mere conveyor belt for Al-Qaeda videos, dared to edit Bin-Laden's pronouncements rather than show them in their entirety, and gave airtime to Al-Qaeda's critics. Because of As-Sahab's video producers' technical expertise, Al-Qaeda can now set itself up as a third force that provides a message different from Western media and the new generation of Arab news providers.

Zawahiri has said that what he calls "jihadi information media" have been "waging an extremely critical battle against the Crusader-Zionist enemy" and have "demolished this monopoly" by confronting conventional media organizations. Taking things a step further, in late 2007, Zawahiri offered to participate in an online interview in which he would take questions from individuals and news organizations.[23]

To some extent, this might be mere gamesmanship on the part of Al-Qaeda. By making

AFP Photo/SITE Intelligence Group

This image from a video released by Al-Qaeda depicts Osama bin-Laden (center inset) urging Pakistani Muslims to rebel against the government of Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf. The image was obtained from the SITE Intelligence Group, 20 September 2007.

himself available for a cyberspace chat, Zawahiri taunts those who have been hunting him for years. By holding a "news conference," the Al-Qaeda leadership positions itself on a plane comparable to that where "real" governments operate. By using new media to communicate with the rest of the world, Al-Qaeda stakes a claim to being an exponent of modernity.

One is tempted to dismiss these maneuvers as just another distracting ploy by murderous thugs, but for those who see Al-Qaeda's cadres as heroic defenders of Islam—and their numbers are substantial—this exercise is evidence of legitimacy, despite Al-Qaeda's vilification by much of the world.

The inadequate responses to Al-Qaeda's media messages heighten the danger. Even a flawed argument has appeal when we allow it to stand in an intellectual vacuum. Moderate Muslims and non-Muslims who do not accept the idea that prolonged conflict is inevitable must recognize this reality and act on it in a sophisticated, comprehensive way.

This means providing a steady stream of videos and other materials through the new media that many members of the Al-Qaeda audience use. This counter-programming should not feature defensive, pro-American content, but rather should concentrate on undermining Al-Qaeda's purported nobility, such as by reminding the audience how many Muslims have died in the terrorist attacks and insurgent warfare Al-Qaeda instigated.

Osama bin-Laden will undoubtedly pop up in another video before long. Note what he says, but then look to the always expanding reservoir of jihadist media to see what Al-Qaeda is really up to. **MR**

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