Media's Role in Countering Radicalization among Young People

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All of us are well aware of the important role of media in all contemporary walks of life, including education, culture, economy and security. Most scholarly studies agree that media has become one of the most prominent features of our modern age, as well as being an effective tool in shaping the collective soul and identity of every country's population.

Considering that security is a basic need for the continuation of human life and a key element for its development and progress, security officials have realized the criticality of engaging with various media outlets and making use of them in spreading security awareness and tackling community issues and concerns. Hence, this context has created the need for the concept of security awareness-oriented media which is concerned with transmitting media education on all security issues that worry every society. On top of that comes the phenomenon of violent extremism among Arab youths, since this anti-social behavior threatens the security of society.

The mission of security agencies lies in maintaining safety and security for the general public by enforcing the law and order in public life and confronting those who violate the law and taking all security means to detect and prevent crime and punish those who are responsible for committing such acts. The concept of security-oriented media is a relatively modern one. It emerged on the media landscape with social development in the last decade of the twentieth century, as well as being a result of the enormous advances made in the media arena and the need to make use of its countless capabilities as they offer a very effective means of influence on the general public and the youth in particular via new media platforms, social media, digital information and advanced technology. Security-oriented media, as defined by Donald Rymer, is the media that takes into account the national interests of each and every country, without compromising the important role and the general mission of the media. William Bailey also agrees with this definition since he considers security-oriented media as a means to maintain the strength of role of that the state plays to provide security and stability against open media.

It is clear that both definitions identify the most important aspects of security-oriented media as a specialized type of media characterized by trustworthiness and objectivity in providing citizens with information, facts and regulations that affect the security and stability of society. It is also consistent with the state policy and works to support the national interests and maintain the security and stability of society. Furthermore, this kind of media can stand in the face of the open media which tries, from time to time, to negate the role of the state and threaten the society through messages that appeal to deviation, crime and radical ideas.

Meanwhile, some studies suggest that media in its various forms, especially the modern form, is considered one of the most important sources of figuring out the patterns of behavior and social awareness. Moreover, more than 90% of social media followers, particularly the youth, put it on top of the list, as a source of the culture of violence, extremism, deviant criminal and anti-social behavior. Another scholarly study on the role of media outlets in shaping the social consciousness among the youth, suggests that 59.82% of the participants are always exposed to the media and 50.2% are exposed to the media for around one to three hours. Similarly, issues of drug addiction, adolescence problems, violence and religious extremism come on top of the themes to which young people are attracted in the media.

Thus we can see the role played by various media outlets in influencing public opinion, attitudes and individual's behavior, particularly for young people. Part of what is broadcast or published leaves a seriously negative impact on the upbringing of the youth and on the security and safety of society. Therefore regulatory government agencies should be made aware of dimensions and risks of such attitudes and should cooperate with such media platforms to present the image that contribute to building a society free from such ills. That's where the security-oriented media comes in to play an important role in educating the public opinion about the dangers related to the security and safety of society. In order to play this role, it should be based on a strategy with clear objectives, so it can contribute in achieving a set of functions related to both individuals and communities with regard to confronting deviation and radicalization, preventing them and addressing their consequences. The objectives can be summarized as following:

1.   Monitor criminal phenomena and terrorist activities at the local and global levels, identify their significance, monitor their media activity, uncover their operating methods and encourage society members to report any information that might help the security agencies to detect terrorist cells and sleeper radical groups.
2.   Develop an effective strategy to confront radical ideas by engaging civil society organizations such as schools, family, media, associations of public benefit and sports clubs.
3.   Carry out constant preventive education campaigns for the young people to protect them from falling prey to extremist groups that work to attract and recruit the youth in their terrorist cells.
4.   Inform the public about the laws related to the crimes of terrorism, religious, social and political extremism, so the pubic could be aware of these rules that could deter those who might be attracted to extremist groups since law doesn't protect the fools and impunity leads to more wrong doing.

And in this respect, we commend the role of Saudi Arabia in confronting terrorism and extremism given that the Kingdom has implemented a media strategy, within the efforts of the Council of Arab Minsters of Interior, which is based on the optimal use of media outlets, religious discourse and online media in educating the public opinion and Arab society of the dangers of terrorism and extremism and lay out print, audio and broadcast media to educate the young people and protect them from falling prey to terrorism and extremism. Furthermore, the religious media discourse should be directed in line with the policies and direction of the state in fighting terrorism, violence and extremism and commitment towards the culture of tolerance and moderation.

Extremism: is a scourge that spreads across society due to not accepting the other's culture or religion and misunderstanding of religion and radicalism. Such rejection turns into aggressive attitudes and practices against others. It has various forms the most important of which are

religious, political and social extremism. In all these forms the extremist resorts to all kinds of violence to impose his/her beliefs on others.

There are signs that indicate extremism such as:

-      Accusing others of deviation and being infidels and labeling other fellow Muslims as non-believers, including governments and security officials and instigating against groups that believe in different faiths, religious orders or sects. The causes that push individuals in the community, particularly the youth, to extremism, violence and vengeance against society could be attributed to the following factors:

a.   Lack of proper understanding of Islamic faith, intellectual emptiness, lack of reliable religious authorities, weak national identity, lack of patriotism and absence of strict laws and regulations for countering extremism. However, what is more important is the negative media's role in confronting such anti-social behavior that affects its fabric.

Proposed suggestions for addressing extremism:

1.   The state should adopt a media-oriented strategy by conducting awareness media campaigns to spread tolerance and coexistence with others, while monitoring religious discourse on media in general and on social media in particular, and review of textbook and references at libraries.

2.   There is a need to educate parents to look after their children and monitor their behavior and their relationship with their peers, for fear that they mingle with and get to know extremist individuals via multiple social media outlets that became venue where the young people meet and get to know each other.

3.   Formation of de-radicalization committees by moderate scholars, along with psychologists and sociologists to talk to radicalized individuals and enlighten them of the risks of falling into the trap of extremism.

4.   Enacting laws and regulations that incriminate hate speech and violent extremism. Such law (that forbid hate speech) has been enacted in the UAE that include a set of articles and incriminate insulting religions, divine books, places of worship and inciting sectarian and racial divide. Such laws punish those who support and fund radical and terrorist ideas.

5.   Strengthen the security aspect by monitoring suspected individuals to identify their movements and activities and tracking the flow of incoming and outgoing money that support extremist groups.

Finally: countering terrorism is not the responsibility of a particular entity, but rather the responsibility of the whole community. The family has a special role to play to guard the society from all kinds of deviation, crime and anti-social behavior. Then comes the role of the rest of institutions and in particular security agencies, media organizations and civil society organizations.