The rise in US airstrikes against the Somali terrorist group Al-Shabaab, while having prompted turnover and defections among the group’s leadership, have done little to hinder its capability to launch deadly attacks in Somalia and Kenya, and, vitally, to attract an increasingly regional following. Efforts to counter and censor the violent insurgents’ message may have short-term effectiveness, but Al-Shabaab’s powerful name recognition reflects a deliberate investment in recruitment that will prove resilient in the long-term.

Brand management, ordinarily, is used to explain how companies sell commercial products to a dedicated following, but can also shed light on how Al-Shabaab continues to attract new recruits. Branding strategy is distinct from strategic communications. The latter seeks to change the minds and behaviours of an audience, whereas the former provides a distinct identity for a consumer to relate to. Brands are exceedingly valuable to companies and markets because of the loyal following they can generate.

Why Branding Matters to Terrorists

In the age of proliferating digital channels and echo chambers, there is much well-deserved criticism of the current response to terrorist communications, which was epitomised at the 2017 G20 Summit, when the Leaders’ Statement on Countering Terrorism prioritised ‘the promotion of … robust and positive narratives to counter terrorist propaganda’. This adversarial mindset has attracted criticism, not least because there is no empirical evidence that it works. ‘The implications for counter-terrorism are that we cannot re-write “their” narrative’ writes Cristina Archetti, an Associate Professor in Politics and Media from the University of Salford who has studied the social and communication aspects of terrorism. Suggesting that there is much to learn from social movements and charities, she says that ‘most audiences generally do not “buy” artificially-packaged top-down messages’ however deft the strategic communications. Rather, she observes that ‘consistency between words and deeds is of paramount importance’. This is not a fight about stories, but rather a competition over reputation and identity.

What is only just starting to emerge in countering violent extremism programming are communications interventions intended to actively include those at-risk of terrorist recruitment in media discourse

Whereas strategic communicators think about time-limited campaigns to change attitudes and behaviour, branding builds reputation and value over an organisation’s lifetime: that is because it seeks to maintain relationships with its supporters based on a distinct, emotionally resonant identity. Addressing solely the discursive nature of terrorist ideology, however powerful and provocative, misses out on its relational character. ‘[I]f we want to understand the role of communication in the construction of the terrorism phenomenon, we must first develop a reading of society as relational’, writes Archetti in Understanding Terrorism in the Age of Global Media.

Branding is how an organisation sustains relations with its audiences over the long-term. Jonathan Matusitz’s study of Hizbullah’s brand examines three traits: differentiation, credibility and authenticity. ‘The public identity of a terrorist organisation includes certain attributes that its stakeholders regard as essential, unique and enduring’, says Matusitz. It is the discipline of ‘impression management’ and the perceived character of an organisation, more than the substance of its propaganda, that gives the organisation influence.

Building and managing a brand is a long-term project which seeks to marry words and action, to build a distinct, credible reputation. Despite some analysis of the power of the global brand developed by Daesh (also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, ISIS), it remains an underdeveloped area of analysis when it comes to Al-Shabaab’s communications.

Branding Al-Shabaab’s Cause

Alongside its military campaign, a range of communications and actions marshal popular consent, or at least control, including what have been called powerful symbolic acts, such as the public performance of communal prayer. To some audiences, principally Arabic and Somali, a steady
rhythm of official statements promote Al-Shabaab as a government-in-waiting. As the group seeks to dominate and govern large parts of Somali territory, they are intent on building an image as a credible and preferable alternative to the Somali government.

To audiences in neighbouring Kenya, however, the insurgents’ immediate objective is to remove Kenyan troops who entered Somalia in 2011 and became part of the African Union Mission to Somalia the following year. Since they are mandated to fight Al-Shabaab and protect the Somali government, Al-Shabaab demands that Kenya’s ‘foreign, occupying’ forces leave Somalia – a means to its ultimate end of governing the country. Yet, the Kenyan presence in Somalia also provides the movement with a rebel cause and raison d’etre. Since 2010, official media productions by Al-Shabaab’s Al-Kataib Media Foundation have targeted Swahili-speakers particularly in East Africa for recruitment. There are few explicit references to Al-Shabaab, the organisation, in a remarkable surge of film productions released by Al-Kataib in the weeks before Kenya’s 2017 elections. Compared to Kenya’s last presidential polls in 2013, when Al-Shabaab issued a radio statement and press release, seven films were made and released, with a total airtime of 2 hours and 50 minutes, that referred explicitly to the Kenyan elections and democracy. Representing a larger trend, in those films the movement spoke of ‘we, the mujahideen’, enabling a Kenyan audience to be brought into grand ideas and a violent mission, rather than who Al-Shabaab is as an organisation.

Explicitly naming an insurgent cause is significant. The name Al-Shabaab – meaning ‘the youth’ in Somali – has resonance, as a militia that was formed in 2006 and which successfully fought to liberate Somalia from what were seen as occupying Ethiopian forces. What might be
more resonant to some potential terrorist recruits in neighbouring Kenya, for instance, is a distinct, rebellious movement that speaks to what they care about – be that injustice, glorious adventure or jobs. Anthropologist Scott Atran explained how a cause, distinct from an ideology, can be instrumentalised to galvanise violence: ‘what inspires the most lethal assailants in the world today is not so much the Quran or religious teachings but rather a thrilling cause and a call to action that promises glory and esteem in the eyes of friends’.

Speaking to ideas of justice, liberation and moral purity; a cause can cross borders and overcome cultural specificity. And, in the words of a manual from the global marketing and branding agency Ogilvy: ‘The reputations of the most valuable brands are built on promises that have a higher purpose’. Since its inception, Al-Kataib’s productions positioned the struggle in Somalia prominently within the global jihadi movement, demonstrating cross-purpose with other Islamist extremists. One Al-Kataib film, for instance, featured the fatal 2013 attack on Fusilier Lee Rigby and the Boston Marathon bombing as examples of a global and historical struggle, depicting the Somali conflict in its concluding quarter.

Writing about the links between emotion, cognition and politics, Manuel Castells explains the power of Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign, which repeatedly evoked ‘hope’. The idea that ‘[s]ocial movements are formed by communicating messages of rage and hope’ is demonstrated today in the UK’s left-leaning political movement, Momentum. Castells describes how ‘hope is the driving emotion’ that motivates political behaviour because it speaks of an imagined future. Such idealistic values resist easy defeat, although their credibility or relevance may wane.

**Reputation First**

Beyond messaging, Ogilvy describes how the power of a brand comes from ‘[p]sychological benefits resulting from a particular set of associations in the mind of customers or other stakeholders. These differentiate it from competitors and create a promise of future performance. By delivering on this promise, reputation is created. It is reputation that is the source of value’. Coherence between acts and promises is a powerful contributor to a successful brand, as is establishing a reputation for consistency over time. Broken promises and U-turns are avoided by politicians in many cultures.

Building and managing a brand is a long-term project which seeks to marry words and action, to build a distinct, credible reputation

Reputation results both from how one presents oneself and how one is portrayed by others. Among the latter, media reporting and government statements can endorse characteristics that strengthen the movement. Al-Shabaab has gained a strong reputation for effective terrorism through the ‘oxygen of publicity’ provided by international and East African mainstream media. As professional, independent observers, the media can authoritatively create an image of unity, organisational coherence and terrorist ‘success’ (and therefore strength) for Al-Shabaab.

In the age of digital networks, communicating brands directly with people through owned media is as important as press coverage. In the films it produces and distributes through Al-Kataib, Al-Shabaab seeks to prove that it can deliver on its promises. ‘A Message to the Muslims in Kenya – a Few Days Before the Country’s General Elections’, released on the eve of the 2017 Kenyan polls, showed a vehicle stolen by Al-Shabaab from a candidate from Kenya’s ruling party, in a constituency in the volatile northeastern part of the country. Action matches image as the fighter, sitting astride the stolen vehicle, berates the Kenyan government, ‘my dear brothers, you can see for yourselves that the Kuffar [a controversial term used in this context as short-hand for ‘unbelievers’] have become weak’.

A consistent ‘track-record’, preferably over a long period, is critical to establishing reputation. Al-Shabaab’s official statement prior to the 2013 Kenyan elections, communicated via radio and official press release, was reproduced nearly verbatim in a film released by Al-Kataib in July 2017. In the later iteration, a masked narrator again urged Kenyans to boycott the polls, claiming that Kenya’s deployment of forces to Somalia and the resulting ‘war is already destabilising your country, disrupting your livelihoods, debilitating your economy and, most crucial of all, undermining your own personal security’.

**Identity and Emotional Resonance**

Leading up to the 2017 Kenyan elections, Al-Shabaab addressed issues connecting their cause to Kenyans. One film from Al-Kataib released in this period speaks about the price of corn flour, which rose during 2017, eventually putting this ubiquitous food staple out of reach for ordinary Kenyans. We understand and identify with your troubles, is what Al-Shabaab is trying to convey. This is not messaging per se: Al-Shabaab does not promise Kenyans cheaper flour. It is about resonance, building loyalty and undermining existing connection to the state. The most powerful intermediary for building relationships is a person, not just as someone who delivers a story, but as someone whose life is the story and wholly represents the brand.

These so-called brand ambassadors are key. Religious figures are critical to a cause such as Al-Shabaab’s, because they can talk to the higher purpose that characterises powerful brands while also connecting through social identity. When local leaders who sympathise with a terrorist cause are murdered by security forces, their ‘martyrdom’ seals their integrity and their unjust demise reinforces the brand story: they paid
the ultimate price unjustly despite seeking a higher cause. Framed as the result of unjustifiable oppression, such events evoke some of the most powerful human emotions, fear and anger, among those who identify with the victims. The 2012 murder of a charismatic and radical preacher from Mombasa, Sheikh Aboud Rogo, allegedly at the hands of Kenyan police, sparked rioting by the city's youth. He remains a much-used 'ambassador' for Al-Shabaab's cause, with excerpts from his video sermons being used in four of Al-Kataib's films in the lead up to Kenya's 2017 elections.

Al-Kataib does not just rely on leaders to represent its cause. As a grassroots movement it recruits ordinary people, not just the religiously pious, by empathising with them in their tribal mother tongue, exploiting emotional connection and identity created by language and grievance. In the film entitled 'Are You Content With The... – Questions to the Muslims in Kenya', eight Al-Shabaab fighters speak in their own tribal languages (Oromo, Kikuyu, Luo, Lahya, Digo, Sheng, Swahili, and Bajuni). They pose rhetorical questions to the viewer about grievances specific to their tribal identity groups such that, for instance, the fighter of Digo ethnicity from Kenya's coastal region asks of the viewer: 'Are you content with Muslim lands being grabbed and usurped by the Kuffar?', referring to emotionally powerful grievances around unjust land ownership.

Like other brands trying to relate to increasingly segmented audiences, Al-Shabaab's cause adopts many faces and tongues. Another film released two weeks before the 2017 polls used a documentary-style and a sophisticated and fact-laden script written in English, blending graphics and excerpts from well-known news channels. It relied on facts and statistics to build a rational economic and political case for Kenyan troops to leave Somalia. Religious ideology (and again 'Al-Shabaab') is entirely absent from the film, as it seeks to relate to educated, non-Muslim audiences in the region. Like many terrorist organisations today, and in sharp contrast to corporations, Al-Shabaab manifests itself as a cause – rarely secular, often religious – knowing it can increase impact and recruitment by riding the tide of much larger historical and global trends. It also knows that this approach makes the organisation's reputation more resilient to the attrition of both its leaders and foot soldiers.

First and foremost, Al-Shabaab is managing a brand – or what Saatchi and Saatchi calls 'loyalty beyond reason' – rather than communicating a terrorist narrative. This puts them at an advantage. Archetti, in The Age of Global Media, explains why the 'linear' notion of a fictionalised narrative or a “message” to be sent out to an audience to trigger certain expected (and predictable) behaviours is obsolete. In the information age, she describes a messy social process involving networks, relationships and identity that results in meaning.

**In the films it produces and distributes through Al-Kataib, Al-Shabaab seeks to prove that it can deliver on its promises**

Since successful brands tend to fill voids in the marketplace, democratic governments can look to those relationships, identities and grievances it is failing to address adequately. While insurgents employ asymmetrical weapons that put them at an advantage, including what Al-Shabaab themselves called 'the weapon of jihadi media', democratic governments should not weaponise the media in response. This is no longer a battle for hearts and minds. Grievances and ideas cannot be ignored, nor can they be counter-messaged or censored out of existence. Reputation is built on consistent action.

Message delivery has never been the sole function of communicating. As well as what communication theorist James Carey calls 'transmission', communication ‘fulfils a ritualistic function, one that reflects humans as members of a social community'. Therefore, relationships with peripheral groups and individual members of society should be strengthened, not undermined. Yet, strategic communications, when used to address the contentious issue of violence, risks harming the very relationships that need to be reinforced as they instrumentalise or co-opt existing media channels, content and 'credible messengers'. Governments should be less concerned with reacting to the terrorists’ messages and more concerned with building their own reputation and standing amongst the people.

This is commonplace advice. Credibly building a government's reputation while undermining that of an adversary requires a difficult and delicate balance. What is only just starting to emerge in countering violent extremism programming are communications interventions intended to actively include those at-risk of terrorist recruitment in media discourse. Supporting youth to participate in public life and better express and represent themselves is a strand of work under the EU's Strengthening Resilience against Violent Extremism (STRIVE II) programme in Kenya. This approach demonstrates and plays to the strengths of pluralist politics as discourse is enlivened and participation widened. This prevention programme is designed to directly address factors behind radicalisation, such as marginalisation and the search for meaning and belonging. Thinking of communications as action with meaning unlocks a multitude of opportunities to address terrorism over the long-term, more than any war of words, or brands, can.

Matthew Freear
Matthew is a Communications Manager at RUSI's Nairobi Office.

The views expressed in this article are the author's, and do not reflect those of RUSI or any other institution. This article is based on work completed as part of the EU-funded STRIVE programme.