

"War On Terror"? Mind your language

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2007/11/06/war-on-terror-mind-your-language/

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The [speech](#) by Jonathan Evans, the new boss of MI5, attracted attention mainly for its warning about the increase in the number of Britons it has identified as people who “pose a direct threat to national security and public safety because of their support for international terrorism”. Apparently, many of those targeted are teenagers. I was interested to see what he said about the language that we use to describe those people and the issues involved:

We must also pay close attention to our use of language. It is easy to forget, in talking of actions, aims and approaches, how what is said affects what is done. Yet you will be as conscious as I am of the consequences of words. And we are tackling a threat which finds its roots in ideology, so words really do matter. This is not political correctness. We cannot create hard and fast rules but we must recognise the extremist message for what it is. Anything which enables it to claim to be representative of Islam; anything which gives a spurious legitimacy to its twisting of theology will only play into its hands. One of Al Qaida’s key aims is to provoke divisions within and between communities, and we have seen their own media department – to which they attach great importance – seeking to do this. So we’ve got to be sure that what is said neither explicitly nor implicitly makes this easier for them. The terrorists may be indiscriminate in their violence against us, but we should not be so in our response to them.

This is something that [Polis](#) has been debating for months now with community representatives, journalists and security officials. They came to the same conclusion that the language used by politicians and the news media is critical. It is not always clear what words are right. If a terrorist describes themselves as ‘Muslim’ or ‘Islamic’ should the media do so as well?

It was notable after the attempted [attacks](#) on London and Glasgow this summer that the new Prime Minister and his Home Secretary were careful to avoid inflammatory language.

The other thing that emerged from our sessions was that the Intelligence services need to be a lot more communicative about what is going on. This speech is a good example as was the [speech](#) by former MI6 boss Sir Richard [Dearlove](#) at Polis last week.

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