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Prime Minister, when trying to free a hostage it is ... OK to use Al-Jazeera

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KNOWLEDGE is power. Armies, navies and vast amounts of wealth are useful too, in the cut-throat contest to project a nation's influence around the globe.

But these things can't deliver hearts and minds.

Only talking to people can do that.

Media access -- being able to speak directly to millions of people -- that is where real power lies in this world.

This is why Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer, and the family of hostage Douglas Wood, were both right -- emphatically right -- to go on the Arabic TV news network Al-Jazeera last week, pleading for their man.

And Prime Minister John Howard is also considering going on Al-Jazeera with the same message.

The PM's decision on this will depend on professional advice he gets in coming days from those closest to the hostage situation in Iraq.

But for what it's worth, my advice to the PM is: do it.

John Howard is one of Australia's most successful-ever leaders, in large part because of his willingness to continually front the Australian people with own message, through the media.

That principle should now be applied to the Arab and Muslim worlds as well.

Australians do not like everything about Al-Jazeera, or about the Arabs, for that matter.

But like the media in our own country, the Arab media is a fact of life that has to be -- indeed, must be -- used as a key ingredient in the struggle against terrorism.

A struggle which is the struggle of our times.

Some people may be unsettled by the notion that the Australian Government might go to "the enemy" -- the Arab media -- to plead for Douglas Wood, an innocent and decent man taken captive by extremely bad people. Is this a case of toadying to the bad guys?

Al-Jazeera, after all, has been happy to broadcast many evil images and messages, including execution videos and bin Laden threats, supplied by al-Qaida and like-minded murderers.

SO what is the Australian Government strategy really all about?

Well, it's this.

Somewhere in the halls of power between Canberra and Baghdad, it was decided early in the Douglas Wood affair to enlist local support within Iraq to try to save his life.

A key tactic for enacting this strategy was to encourage local religious and tribal leaders to play a role in contacting and communicating with the hostage-takers.

Getting the personal message out concerning Douglas Wood, through the Arab media, was central to the operation.

Mr Downer repeatedly told his Al-Jazeera interviewer that Mr Wood, a civilian, had been in Iraq "helping to improve the lives of Iraqis."

He also emphasised Mr Wood's humanity, highlighting his poor health and the fact that "he has a wife and he has three brothers and a child."

Even if it doesn't save Wood's life, this is a powerful message, delivered in exactly the right place.

All media -- television, radio and the press -- can be two-edged swords.

Good guys and bad guys can use them.

That is certainly the case with Al-Jazeera.

In a book published last year, I drew attention to the anti-terrorism strategy proposed to the West by the great Israeli scholar, Professor Yehuda Bauer.

Propaganda is a key plank in Prof Bauer's strategy.

He advocates: "An ideological, propagandistic attack on radical Islam led by allies from within the Muslim world."

In my view, any such propagandistic attack must use the Arab media as much as possible.

As Hugh Miles explains in his important new book *Al-Jazeera*, reporters from the Arab TV network have been accused both of helping and of undermining al-Qaida at different times.

One Al-Jazeera reporter in Spain, Tayssir Alluni, is facing trial on charges of being an al-Qaida member and recruiter.

ANOTHER Al-Jazeera reporter, Yosri Fouda, played a key role, at least in Hugh Miles' opinion, in the arrest by Pakistani security forces of "the 20th hijacker" of September 11, Ramzi bin al-Shaibh.

Fouda interviewed Ramzi in Karachi in 2002.

When Al-Jazeera broadcast a trailer for the interview using an audio clip of the terrorist's voice, the US National Security Agency's computer matched the clip with one of their intercepted phone calls.

This, Mr Miles theorises convincingly, led the US and Pakistani forces directly to Ramzi. A key arrest.

More good than harm will come from encouraging the growth of the Arab media.

Particularly if they are media where Westerners are increasingly seen and heard.

Not as caricatures of "the infidel", but as normal human beings.

Human beings with hearts and families.

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