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**MUSLIM VOICES: THE BRITISH MUSLIM
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- AN EXPLORATORY STUDY**
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MUSLIM VOICES: THE BRITISH MUSLIM RESPONSE TO ISLAMIC VIDEO POLEMIC – AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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MUSLIM VOICES: THE BRITISH MUSLIM RESPONSE TO ISLAMIC VIDEO-POLEMIC - AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

Abstract

This paper represents an attempt to deconstruct how Muslims living in Britain might respond to militant Islamist propaganda, as typified by selected 'Jihadist' video-clips obtained from the Internet, using a discussion group format. The article discusses the methodological difficulties of conducting research in the propaganda field using a conventional advertising-evaluation type approach, and provides a series of testable propositions to guide further research in the field. The central thesis is that 'Jihadist' communications focus around a meta-narrative of Muslims as a unitary grouping self-defined as victim to Western aggression. While early indicators are that some genres of propaganda may be more effective than others (e.g. cartoons) in introducing this notion and some groupings more susceptible than others, we conclude that in general most Muslim respondents were unsympathetic to the messages contained in the propaganda clips. This paper will be of particular interest to managers of government social and market research programmes and media/PR practitioners.

1. Introduction

In an Ipsos MORI survey (2005), most Muslims living in Britain felt part of British society and believed they make a valuable contribution to it. The poll, which examined Muslims' reactions to the July 2005 London bombings, showed a majority (53%) believed that "the war in Iraq is the main reason why London was bombed". Only 14% said that "the war in Iraq had nothing to do with why London was bombed" (MORI, 2005). Such opinions are no doubt inter-layered with strong opinions on what is perceived as dubious Anglo-American foreign policy in the Middle East generally. Catastrophic foreign policy decisions since the 2nd World War include the Anglo-American invasion of Iran to depose the Iranian premier, Mossadeq, and the British-French-Israeli invasion of Egypt in the Suez Crisis in the 1950s, American support for Israel in numerous pan-Arab conflicts leading to the OPEC oil crises of 1970s, and the support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war, then against it in the First and Second Gulf Wars - the 2nd seemingly without direct provocation and, more importantly, a UN mandate. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, recent studies have revealed a tiny but bitterly alienated minority. A briefing from the highly-respected Royal Institute of International Affairs suggests the allied invasion of Iraq in 2003 "gave a boost to the Al-Qaeda network's propaganda, recruitment and fund-raising" (RIIA, 2005). Consequently, there is some scope for believing that some British Muslims may be more persuaded by Islamist fundamentalist propaganda than others.

This threat is all the more unpalatable when we consider that the security threat from small groups of transnational, stateless, terrorists can be as great as those from enemy states (Shubik, 1997). The question is who is most susceptible to such propaganda messages, to what extent, and via what means? Such support for domestic terrorism, apparent if latent, has far-reaching ramifications. Such attitudes are neither innate nor inherent but arise out of a process of social production. Terrorists and their backers are not so much born as persuaded, in socio-religious and socio-political contexts, through the use of propaganda (Powell, 1967), particularly where the aim is a call to identify with the aims of war (Bernays, 1942; Finch, 2000).

Previous attempts to deconstruct such propaganda imagery and messages have been superficial. O'Shaughnessy (2004) examined Al–Qaeda videos before and in the immediate aftermath of '9-11' from a persuasion perspective, considering the use of fast-moving imagery, 'atrocity' propaganda, anti-semite hyperbole, and editorial sleight of hand (e.g. multiple imagistic reproductions of the death of the Palestinian child Mohammed Al-Dura). Lawrence (2005) interprets the Al-Qaeda message through a representation of the speeches of Osama Bin Laden, in an explicit attempt to demythologise the terrorist network. No-one has yet investigated how British Muslims respond to militant Islamist propaganda material, or how British Muslims perceive

Islamist media material featuring violent (and therefore both secondary, and highly contentious) definitions of Jihad. In addition, the market research industry has not yet developed the sensitivity techniques necessary to gauge how this important yet febrile type of research should really be conducted.

2. The Communicative Environment

A *Populus/Times Muslims Poll* (2005) found in 2005 that 12% of 18-24 year-olds believe suicide bombings against civilians to be legitimate. The next year the same poll found that 13% of British Muslims believe that the four suicide bombers of July 7, 2005 should be regarded as 'martyrs' while 7% said that attacks on UK civilians could be justified in some circumstances (*The Times*, 2006). Caution is needed in assessing the balance of influence in the formation of attitudes between the mass media and that of mosques and community societies. The MP for Dewsbury Shahid Malik confirmed (*BBC Radio 4 News*, 14.4.06 at 8am) the presence of 'Jihadist' and terrorist views in the Muslim community and noted that some Muslims were 'in denial' about such. The UK government does track Muslim opinion through seven working parties set up by the Home Office after the July 2004 terrorism (House of Commons, 2006)[1]. The 64 recommendations focussed especially on media-centric proposals with ideas borrowed from New Labour's assertive 'permanent campaign' concept of governing: a Muslim affairs media unit to rebut extremism, the maintenance of a list of speakers for media interviews; a website of mainstream Muslim thought for youth, and a 'roadshow' of scholars to provide a counter-narrative to extremist thought. What the report does not cover is the core issue of how such ostensibly ordinary Muslims became terrorist sympathisers in the first place.

2.1. Message Receivers and Senders

Michael (2004:12) recognised 'signs of exclusion' in young Pakistani Muslims in particular. The FCO/Home Office report on Young Muslims and Extremism, according to Michael (2004), found three factors which attracted some to extremism: 1) anger at the 'double standards' of British foreign policy in relation to Palestine and Iraq, for example, 2) alienation following attempts to integrate modern Islamic identity with modern secular society, and 3) activism to reduce various perceived ills in the society around them.

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[1] Fifty-two people were killed (including the four suicide bombers) and more than 700 injured by 4 separate, co-ordinated, suicide bomb attacks on London's transport and bus system.

The message senders from Al Qaeda (and other extreme Islamist sources) are concerned primarily with western intervention in the middle east, i.e. a political concern, though other commentators attribute to them the assertion of a cultural supremacy; whatever the exact nature of their motivation, the chosen weapon is suicidal action. The messages are carefully constructed, as are messengers' appearances, words, references, and timings. The core idea is the manipulation of symbols by message makers to interact with social and cultural environments so that messages are constructed and deconstructed in ways which maximise their acceptance (see Bateson, 1972; Goffman, 1974; Hallahan, 1999). Thus the ideologically favoured roles -of individuals, groups, institutions- are foregrounded (Hertog & McLeod, 2001) and the less favoured backgrounded or erased. The flag-waving and marching in Riefenstahl's Olympiad (1936) or the tea -drinking and joshing of volunteer firemen in the blitz-era film *Fires Were Started* (1943) exemplify such symbolic foregrounding. Conducted by 'symbol handlers' (Gitlin, 1980), the message cannot be understood divorced from the culture in which it occurs (Hertog & McLeod 2001). Even in commercial contexts, the framing process is operationalised into emotive storytelling form (Fog *et al*., 2005:31).

Thus the meta-narrative here is one of the Muslim as victim of the oppressive West. But what can market research tell us about how such messages are received by this important British minority group?

3. Methodology

The primary aim of this research study was to:

> *Explore the perceptions of selected Muslim groups towards radical anti-western propaganda material broadcast by Al-Qaeda and the major Iranian TV channels using an advertising evaluation approach with a view to informing future social research in this area.*

The discussion centred on whether or not the audio-visual material persuaded Muslims living in Britain? What are respondents' views of the content, message and style of the clips? Four discussion groups were conducted: two in London (in Edgware, Bangladeshi women 18-34 years old and Tower Hamlets, Bangladeshi males 18-34 years old), one in the Midlands (Birmingham, Pakistani men, 18-34 years old) and one in Dewsbury (Pakistani mothers, all ages) in areas of relatively high Muslim population density. Respondents were recruited by Ipsos MORI street interviewers. Each group of 4-8 participants lasted 1½ to 2½ hours, used Muslim

moderators, briefed on the sensitivity of the research and the need to reassure respondents (Kay, 2001). Respondents were questioned on their perceived identity, the types of Islamist communications they had seen, their views of selected audio-visual clips after watching these Islamist communications, and how Muslims and non-Muslims might communicate better in the future in Britain. Five clips were used, selected from a broad range of polemical Islamist audio-visual material (hosted by the Middle East Media Research Institute - memritv.org) to reflect a range of the type of material that Muslims could be subjected to in their daily lives (see Appendix 1 for a precis of each clip). Respondents were asked to complete a short questionnaire on each clip about what images and messages they remembered, and a short post-video attitudinal questionnaire.

4. Findings

We initially content-analysed a series of propaganda video-clips from the perspective of the message senders together with the findings from the discussion groups, to provide an understanding of what the message senders might be trying to convey to our Muslim respondents. The video-clips represent two source organisations, a virtual state, Al Qaeda, and a real one, Iran. Both glorify terrorism. One is a state, the other a terrorist organization and yet there are no perceptible ethical differences in the nature of their proselytisation; the distinction lies entirely in the quality of the production values. The tapes make clear that the nation state itself is capable of terror. What is noteworthy about these Jihadist tapes is their modernism. Many in the west tend to perceive 'Jihadism' as a religious conspiracy, but the impression given here is of a violent and secular political struggle. God is marginal in the rhetoric, acknowledged but not central. The clips parody western cultural and communications norms, probably not ironically, representing the cultural interface product as hybridized text emanating from a blend of east and west. This is manifest through rational discourse, the sound-bites, the dynamic graphics, the references to consumer culture and the secular/nationalist preoccupations infused with global awareness.

But behind both militant Islamist propaganda products lies the conviction of a global conspiracy against Islam. Global conspiracy must therefore be met by global conspiracy, and it is the perception of a global war to win the freedom and independence of what they see, and wish to establish as, a trans-national Muslim nation which fires these pseudo-prophets and martyrs in a replica of colonial struggle. Ideas which simplify and universalize are always problematic but they have the attraction of creating sharp coherence out of a complex, contradictory and nuanced world: the universal class struggle, or the Jewish-Bolshevik world conspiracy, represent earlier forms of the coherent integrating perspective (Ellul, 1973;

O'Shaughnessy 2004). Terror organizations are willing to 'talk' and market terror as never before, to articulate their deeds through propaganda:

> *The aim of modern propaganda is ... to provoke action ... to make the individual cling irrationally to a process of action. It is no longer to lead to a choice, but to loosen the reflexes ... to arouse an active and mythical belief (Ellul, 1973).*

It is for this reason that we propose that the efficacy of the message be measured.

But the effectiveness of these clips varies according to target group and they may not be provoking the reactions they intended: there are dramaturgic failings, symbolic incongruities and unintended readings (see Appendix 1). In the next section, we consider the respondents' evaluations of the audio-visual material.

4.1. Young Male Group, London, of Bangladeshi Origin

The group comprised 3 Muslims and one revert[2]. All four respondents prayed daily and attended the Mosque. The respondents claimed to have a very limited awareness of Islamist communications but thought them to be irresponsible and childish. The video-clips did not muster any support from the respondents and were unlikely to stimulate respondents to act in the name of Allah.

Clip 1 of the bridgegroom martyr was likened to a Bollywood film, overly dramatized, with poor music but attractive lead characters. It triggered laughter because of its slightly modern/funky format and overly anti-Western content but was not felt to be likely to influence UK Muslims. The group thought the film had a clear message encouraging suicide bombing. Clip 2 – the cartoon – **"lacked a sense of reality"** and was not "likely to influence young Muslims" because it was animation, a striking difference in view compared with the female Muslim mother group. Clip 3, of Al-Zawahiri, triggered some 'head-nodding', in agreement. The leader was felt to have spoken the truth about the number of young Muslim children dying at the hands of the West. Most suspected the content of the clips was not completely factual and should be taken with a "pinch of salt". Where the footage used apparently 'real' images (Muslims firing cruise missiles in the name of Allah), respondents felt that the message was likely to muster support amongst those Muslims who have already been corrupted or are more easily swayed. Clip 4 of Sadiq was felt to have been "gravely misguided", of his having been "brainwashed" by Islamist leaders. The respondents were saddened that he had chosen to commit suicide. Finally, Clip 5, the *faux* Al-

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[2] He became a practising Muslim later in his life.

Qaeda news broadcast, surprised the group, due to the film's modern format. The group disagreed with what was said and felt the 'news coverage' to be extremely biased.

4.2. Female Mothers Group, Dewsbury, of Pakistani Origin

The group consisted of 8 Muslim women by birth. This group posed particular difficulties because 2 of the group were illiterate in both English and Urdu, another 3 had no literacy in English but could speak Basic English and write and speak Urdu, and the other 3 could speak, read and write English and Urdu. Most of the group had been resident in the UK for 20 years or more. The lives of this group revolved around their children and religion. Most spent the time on household duties although some would read the Quran in their scarce spare time. Half of them did not watch any TV and were not exposed to any media, and remained at home most of the time.

No one in this group could recall any Islamist communication. Two of the English-speaking, younger respondents mentioned the TV clips they had seen of the 7/7 bomber on the news channels. In response to Clip 1 – the Iranian groom– this group of Pakistani mothers generally did not understand the (English) language, thinking it was a love story. With Clip 2 – the Cartoon – we found a particularly interesting reaction. It had a powerful impact visibly changing their moods, and one lady had tears in her eyes. They "could the feel the pain of the boy, as they were mothers themselves" and, under such circumstances, the revenge-action taken by the child was justified. The mothers believed this clip would urge young people to "take action" because of the perceived injustice:

"If kids see too much of this stuff they take it on board, kids are susceptible".

As a propaganda device, the clip represents a very good control of audience sympathies. Clip 3 – the Al-Zawahiri speech – was not understood by this group, as they did not understand Arabic and the English subtitles were too fast-moving for them to be understood properly. In their views, the speech was "boring". Some of the group had, however, seen parts of Clip 4 –Sadiq– before and recognised the young man. They generally condemned such violence and the London killings although one of group said that it would be wrong to judge an individual for his actions without knowing "the full story". Sympathy was subtly extended to him: the thinking being that something must have happened to this young person for him to "take such steps". Broadly, however, this group felt that his message was inherently wrong:

> *"He says he is killing and taking revenge in the name of Allah but Allah doesn't tell you to kill people. It is wrong."*

With Clip 5- the Al-Qaeda news broadcast – the format went over their heads. The clip confused the group with talk about Hurricane Katrina and people suffering and the firing of guns in the small inset in the clip. To this group, Jihad had multiple meanings. For some, it was fighting for your rights, for others it was about religious struggle. Two of the women claimed to have never heard of the word 'Jihad'.

4.3. Young Female Group, East London, of Mixed Muslim Origin

This group comprised nine women aged between 18-36 years old, who had either recently arrived from a Muslim country or had been born in the UK. Some wore the *hijab*, others did not. Respondents could not recall any Islamist communication material. They discussed how Muslims were portrayed by the Western media, arguing that they have destroyed the image of Islam by describing Muslims as fundamentalists by, for example, showing sinister figures in black threatening to blow people up, suicide bombings and Hamas scarves. Respondents had attended conferences/seminars where images of Muslim women and children who had been killed and mutilated by "Western" forces were shown:

> *" ... it's so ironic that the media shows Muslims in a bad light . . . but when it comes to the Muslim countries being thrashed by Israel, they don't show that. It is only in the conferences that you see that".*

Seeing these images shocked them and upset them. With Clip 1, the group felt that it was "a recruitment video targeted at young men". They felt empathy for people who are "forced" into taking such actions and have nothing to live for. This group felt that the message was for mothers/wives/sons and that Jihad was about sacrificing their loved ones for a cause. Clip 2 – the Cartoon - saddened this group at the helplessness of the situation and the desperation of children and families living in camps. The clip showed "the reality of what is happening". Respondents with children were particularly worried about the impact the clips would have on their own children describing the clip as "sinister".

Clip 3 – Al-Zawahiri – was not well-received by this group. They felt that the speeches and images make the situation worse for Muslims. Notably, this group had less to say than others. Clip 4 – Sadiq – surprisingly had not been seen by this group of young women. The majority were angry, shocked, feeling "quite shaky", to see an educated and articulate young man engaging in such action. They did not agree with

his justification, saying: "listening to the words … sent shivers down my spine". But there was more than a whiff of sympathy for the suicide bomber as someone acting out of sheer desperation rather than as a deliberate act of evil:

> *"how and what happens to transform a young person into a terrorist?"*

> *"this feeling of frustration at not being heard, you can see why he does it".*

There is a meta-narrative within these data indicated by phrases such as "... for someone that intelligent to go into extremism like that there must be a reason". There is evidence of a narrative that cannot be spoken publicly, the guarded language of a minority under threat, because speaking their true thoughts and emotions appears to condone the gross violence of the suicide bomber. We see hints of self-censorship, which can only be detected by the careful listener, perhaps because the respondents understand the suicide bomber's frustration: they feel it strongly themselves. There appears some support for the ideological position, if not the acts, of the terrorist since there was incredulity that a young intelligent person like Sadiq could take such action:

> *". . . I think there may be many more like him . . . more coming of these bomb attacks all around the world."*

The clip would most likely persuade those who already feel alienated and aggravated. The final clip, Clip 5 – the Al-Qaeda newsflash - was too long. They were alienated by the subject's views on Katrina and the joy he felt about the destruction caused. They were saddened by such events and loss of life, and the framing of it as a supernatural act of Islamic justice. They were quite literally "disgusted" at his views although they felt that such images could affect young men. Respondents felt that such material was causing Muslims to be seen in a bad light:

> *"I don't know whether it is me being paranoid but when walking the streets I felt there were loads of people looking at me"*

> *"I feel that there are a lot of things I can't say now because everything is so sensitive".*

Jihad was all about personal struggle to become a better Muslim but they said that the media and certain groups had portrayed it as something else (i.e. a holy war).

4.4. Young Male Group, Birmingham, of Pakistani Origin

Convened a month after the other 3 groups in August 2006 before the Heathrow bomb scare, this group comprised ten male members aged between 18 and 28 years of age, of Pakistani background. The majority were students, of professional disciplines such as dentistry and pharmacy. When discussing radicalism, three members of this group first thought to denounce Israel and America, for their hypocrisy and double-standards. For examples:

> *"[America] is supposed to be spreading democracy and freedom ... they go to these Geneva conventions for prisoners of war and they catch people in Afghanistan, Iraq or wherever and take them to Guantanamo Bay and do whatever because they are not prisoners of war... you can't spread [democracy] and not have the values yourself. That is radicalism".*

> *"Why is radicalism always associated with Islam? Surely if innocent people are dying on both sides both parties are signatory to this radicalism? To tie one set of people only with this label, this can't be right."*

> *"If I am defending my country, my house, I am a Muslim I would be called a terrorist. If I am a Jew or a Hindu, I am a freedom fighter".*

When shown Clip 1 – the Iranian bridegroom – respondents were guarded in their responses, intimating their understanding of the bridegroom's plight, their "understanding of why some people feel compelled to attack Israel". People who see this "might copy" the act, reacting to the message that "the Western world is corrupt". With Clip 2 – the cartoon – one respondent likened the animation to the reality of the Muslim's plight, indicating his susceptibility to the message:

> *"There seems to be such a disparity between the Israeli soldiers with their machine guns and the children with their stones. I know it is a cartoon but there is the reality as well".*

There was the implication in the animation that the call to Jihad was especially legitimised because the enemy Israeli was a military target waging war on civilian Palestinians:

> *"Capturing military soldiers [sic] is completely different from killing average people living in the suburbs of Palestine".*

On Clip 3 – Al-Zawahiri – respondents tended to agree that America adopted an hypocritical and bullying posture in relation to the United Nations, in relation to pushing through resolutions to bomb Iraq, for example:

"Up to [a] point, most of what he [Al-Zawahiri] said made sense".

On Clip 4 – Sadiq – the group tended to disagree with the way he reacted but sympathised with his view that Muslims are being oppressed. Sadiq's actions were projected as a powerful metaphor, likened to a battered wife killing her husband. The implication being that this was an action worthy of sympathy and clemency. Finally, in Clip 5 – Al-Qaeda news – the group find a "trite" and "comical" communication full of "black and white ideas" although one respondent felt that he probably did not receive the full message because it was originally in Arabic – a language he did not understand - and that language is full of imagery.

4.5. On Being Muslim

To the respondents 'being Muslim' was easier for some than for others. Practising Islam was 'Jihad': the struggle to internalize and practice the religion as it permeates their daily lives and interactions, their identity and, for men, how they interact with women (i.e. things they were/not allowed to do and say in the company of women and suppression of sexual thoughts). Being Muslim is described as follows:

"a way of life, it's not just prayers. It is looking at everything as a Muslim".

"...the way we eat, the way we sleep, the way we go to the toilet, the way we get up in a morning".

Respondents had complex notions of their own identities and the term 'British Muslim' was rejected:

" I am Muslim and will always be Muslim first. Getting a British passport doesn't make you British."

"It is important for me to be a Muslim, although I would say I am British . . . if I were to go to Bangladesh for a holiday, it would feel just like a holiday . . . my home is here, so I am part of England and I love it."

> *"On paper I am Muslim and British and my parents are Pakistani. What comes first is Muslim, Pakistani, and then British. The first two are what defines me most. I don't really know what being British is."*

There was also some evidence of contempt for what Muslims perceive to be British culture:

> *"Our values are not to drink, not to go out and fornicate, and here there is a bit of a culture to go out clubbing and that is where you see a lot of these things, a lot of drinking going on."*

4.6. Communicating with Muslims

When questioned on how the British government could communicate better with Muslims, respondents expressed little desire for this, pointing out their dislike for the post 9/11 and 7/7 focus on UK Muslims. The mixed Muslim young women group had a much more coherent response to how the British government and Muslims might promote better relations between them including:

- The promotion of more positive images of Muslims and contributions they make to British society to counter the negative images of Muslims.

- Educating the general public about the true meaning of Islam, i.e. the personal struggle as opposed to holy war interpretation.

- Providing credible, articulate and intelligent spokespersons for young Muslims, by Muslim groups, who can challenge the media and government.

- Funding research to find ways of engaging young Muslims in British society.

5. Experimental Limitations

Our groups saw the videos in the highly artificial environment of a quasi-experiment, in a market/social research setting. The viewing of the clips was divorced from the context in which such images might normally be consumed, and our results do not give any level of insight into the small but significant support, or at least justification,

for the July 7 bombers in Britain. We need to look elsewhere for an explanation, to concepts such as sealed discourse and notions of hermetic groupthink. This research indicates the importance of context, such as a meeting full of young men seething with anger, inspired first by a speaker then by video polemic. What are really needed are the skills of the social anthropologist combined with those of the advertising researcher, but modified to reflect the uniqueness of context. The need to understand the social forces at work cannot be overstated since there is evidence that networks of suicide bombers from Palestine have operated independently, without top-down tasking from higher authorities (Perdahzur and Perliger, 2006).

The measurement of the impact of any texts, including polemical material, is always difficult, as it is with orthodox consumer advertising. Measurement concepts such as 'Impact' or 'Effectiveness' have multiple and shifting meanings, for example when we ask for 'measurement' we might in fact be posing the wrong question. The problem here lies with the amount of socially awkward candour that may be requisite for an answer to be truthful. And since participation in a discussion group is also a public act, the admission of sympathy for a terrorist group is a public admission, making 'measurement' in any conventional sense next to impossible. We pick up on nuances: but this makes our analyses conjectural. A key part of a future investigation must therefore be to create the impression of researcher neutrality. For example, one group described Bin Laden as a laughable character, hiding in a cave "dressed in sheets", with a "kidney infection". But we detected nevertheless a slight admiration because he bravely fought for a cause he believes in.

A discussion group has other significant limitations. It is too small to be representative of the population, for instance, and so the findings herein cannot be generalised. We cannot, for instance, in this study determine whether or not people of specific gender, socio-economic circumstances, ethnicity or ideological persuasion are more likely to support terrorist activity or not. For example there is the pressure for social appropriateness, since other members of the group are not intimate friends but are unknown. Those with extremist views may have refused to take part, so there is also an element of self de-selection, which was notable with our Bangladeshi male group.

Respondents' views may even be influenced by the very material the participants watch and discuss: the so-called 'Hawthorne' effect[3]. Our challenge, to the UK market and social research industry, is to devise sensitive and dignified methods by which we can assess how British Muslim citizens are affected by polemical Islamist

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[3] The idea that the very act of interviewing effects what you are measuring was confirmed by a series of celebrated experiments in productivity in the US between 1924-33 by psychology researchers at the Hawthorne works of the Western Electric Company in Chicago. The effect is to social science what Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle is to the natural sciences: namely measuring an effect alters that effect through the very act of measurement.

communications, whose impact could be injurious to them and their place in British society.

5.1. Discussion: The Impact of Propaganda

As we have said, no terrorist organisation has ever marketed itself like this before; Bin Laden, as the American journalist Frank Rich has written (O'Shaughnessy 2004), may be a cave dweller, but he is no cave man. The circumstances both of militant Islamism's creation and promulgation arise directly from conditions in the contemporary and not the medieval world. The division between state-produced (Iranian) and virtual state (Al-Qaeda) produced material is significant, with a gulf in professionalism. But production values are not necessarily an asset since cruder production can seem an index of authenticity. Our viewers, partially but not entirely assimilated into modern British culture, were particularly unimpressed by the Iranian attempts to reproduce contemporary entertainment styles. Nevertheless, social and marketing researchers should be concerned at the evidential use of marketing mechanisms for nefarious purposes.

All of the video-clips act as symbol systems sharing a private language of access and exclusion. Without sharing the culture of which these symbol systems are a part, westerners (including Muslims born in Britain) are deaf to some of their meaning and nuance, for example where the wrongs done to Palestinians becomes the universal symbol of all Muslim weakness and victimhood. Nevertheless, they did appear to offer some support for the ideological position that Anglo-American foreign policy is causing suffering in the Middle East and to Muslims. Consequently, this legitimates listening to anti-Western sentiment and propaganda material.

The Iranian cartoon and their 'martyr' video offer another instance in recalling the murder of Palestinian boys (such as Mohamed Al Durra who also features in Bin Laden propaganda). Martyrdom is the big idea, the meta-narrative, that underscores the imagery watched by our respondents. Martyrdom is also central to the myth-making process surrounding historical propaganda, and Goebbels himself recognised martyr-creation as his key task (Baird, 1992).

The very brevity of these video-clips suit modern attention spans and the soundbite culture; for they are little more than consumer advertisement length. The images themselves constitute a pastiche of Western media, striking some false chords and encountering credibility problems with media-savvy British Muslim youth, particularly in the reaction of the males to the 'naff' Iranian music. These are after all visually literate contemporary British citizens whose primary identifier may be Islam

but whose perceptual conditioning influences are those of modern Britons. In the real lives of the respondents, there are many competing information systems on Islamist and Islamic issues inside communities, families and kinship groups. We can talk therefore of a competitive marketplace of information to win 'hearts and minds', accessible to all its protagonists whether propagandists, governments or special-interest groups.

5.2. Propositions for Further Research

We now outline a series of testable propositions which arise from this exploratory study. We hope this work will precipitate further research, by government, academe, the market and the social research industry and special interest groups, on how British Muslims are continuing to respond, whether via indifference, rejection, acceptance or activism, to the ongoing militant Islamist propaganda campaign and its incendiary communications.

Propaganda tends to operate as a *coherent integrating perspective*, where complex phenomena are reduced to simple and internally consistent explanatory formula. Underlying causal unities are perceived where none exist, such as the belief in a universal Muslim victimhood where the west is perpetrator/aggressor, selectively reading evidence, or the tendency to attribute omnipotence to the West so that Arab nations become mere vassals or client states, which is far from being true. 9/11 has caused Muslims to introspect, to question their civic identities. One common assumption is that Muslims are 'radicalised' by Al-Qaeda and other Islamist propaganda; but, on the other hand, an alternative thesis is that radical propaganda actively creates repulsion (the alienation hypothesis) as well as attraction (as some of our respondents would suggest). Do Islamist communications only appeal to the pre-committed, refreshing commitment certainly but not aiding the further recruitment of suicidal foot soldiers? This is a key question. In consequence there is, we believe, no easily codifiable response to Jihadi propaganda among British Muslim citizens. It is for example unlikely that vulnerable respondents completely 'swallow' all the claims of the propagandist. Rather, they are more likely to function as co-producers of the Jihad fantasy as a reverie of enmity and revenge, becoming no mere object of persuasion but complicit in the hallucination of outrage and justice retrieved. There is a further question of whether Islamist propaganda appeals more to the underprivileged or the privileged in Islamic Britain, a topic of some contention more generally in the debate on the social make-up of terrorists (Krueger and Maleckova, 2003). Terrorists often tend to operate in areas of high social inequality and unemployment, for example, in the European context the Protestant and Catholic communities in Northern Ireland (Boyle and Hadden, 1994), and the support of the relatively poorer Basque population for the Spanish terrorist group, ETA.

In our first set of propositions, we suggest:

P1: Respondents with confused cultural identities, typified by recent conversion or reversion to Islam, are more likely to be susceptible to Islamist propaganda than those whose cultural identities are more strongly held.

P2: Susceptibility to Islamist propaganda is subject to inter-generational differences (e.g. young and adult children, parent, grandparent) and socio-economic differences (e.g. high versus low unemployment, high versus low socio-economic inequality).

We would suggest that there is likely to be a greater susceptibility to Islamic propaganda amongst those who feel the greatest mismatch between their own culture and the 'British' culture. This mismatch is most likely to cluster around the belief that the 'British' culture encourages hedonistic fornication and drinking and other 'corrupt' practices.

P3: Respondents feeling contempt for the Western culture, particularly with regard to the belief that Western culture encourages fornication and excessive drinking, are more likely to be susceptible to Islamist propaganda.

There is a perceived greater risk of susceptibility of children; although we did not specifically test Islamist messages with children. Adult audiences seemed more likely to connect with the material in the cartoon tested, despite its lack of authenticity. A distinction has been made, notably by Goebbels, between overtly political propaganda and propaganda disguised as entertainment (Taylor, 1983). The cartoons succeed because they function as entertainment, or more precisely, because the format of a cartoon announces itself as entertainment, lowering the perceptual defences. Entertainment-as-propaganda represents the inadvertent consumption of a political message and a trespass on our consciousness. More needs to be understood about the relative strengths of the various persuasion paradigms on offer here. In our study, Zawahiri's style of rational discourse was more impactful than the imagery of the zealots; on this evidence, his organization is neither mad nor deluded. Pseudo-reason can be more powerful as persuasion than crudely emotional appeals. A consideration of the genres from the perspective of *Resonance Theory* (Schwartz, 1973) may illuminate this further: the emotion resonance generated in the Iranian cartoon was effective because the cartoons functioned at a more abstract and symbolic level. Consequently, we propose the need to research the impact of format and genre of Islamist communications on both children and adults:

P4a: Children, whose cultural identities are less well-formed, are more susceptible to Islamist propaganda framed in some genre formats (e.g. cartoons) more than others (e.g. news broadcast).

P4b: Adults, including parents, are also more likely to be susceptible to Islamist propaganda messages framed in some genre formats (e.g. cartoons) more than others (e.g. news broadcast).

Ethnic and demographic groups may respond differently to Islamist propaganda material with some respondents more likely to condone than condemn terrorist acts. Passive sponsoring of terrorism has long been evidenced by governments, e.g. America and the IRA, Pakistan and Al Qaeda (Bryman, 2005), but is it happening at the citizen level? Our exploratory study cannot and does not confirm this since the research was not representative of British Muslim citizens. There is a need for more representative research on this topic. Nor did our research provide evidence that men may be more susceptible than women and Pakistanis more susceptible than Bangladeshis to Islamist propaganda, but we cannot rule this out, especially since some demographic groups are more likely to come across the material than others (e.g. young men as opposed to mothers):

P5: Varied ethnic and demographic groups (e.g. gender) respond differently to Islamist propaganda material.

The research reveals difficulties in researching a cross-cultural and sensitive subject. Some Muslim mothers could not read or write English. The male Bangladeshis in London were difficult to recruit, because they distrusted the objectives of the research. There are difficulties to researching susceptibility to Islamist propaganda because many subjects will not want to acknowledge that susceptibility or recognise it when it happens. There is an argument in sensitive research environments for respondents to self-report (Tourangeau and Smith, 1996), or for researchers to adopt the stylistic conventions of an intimate interview to achieve self-disclosure (Birch and Miller, 2000). Such issues require debate and consideration in the market research industry. There are clearly issues of privacy, confidentiality and ethics surrounding this type of research (Hill, 1995) which also need to be further considered.

6. Conclusion

British Muslim opinion is not a monolithic slab but variegated, with strong latent emotions, such as sympathy for the Palestinians. We have no measure of how tenaciously views are held. We can speak of a selective rather than a general hostility to the UK; British Muslim male and female citizens could be described as disappointed patriots rather than unpatriotic, particularly because of the perceived unjust policy stances taken by successive British/American administrations towards Palestine, Iran, Israel, Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East since the end of the 2nd World War. There are real parallels in the attitudes of the Irish towards the IRA and the German/ Italian radical left to Baader Meinhof and the Red Brigades, i.e. (1) to be truly appalled by the act itself, the atrocity but 2) be highly aware of the process of its political and social causation.

This review on a highly sensitive contemporary subject, which could be labelled *the* issue of our times, connects with matters of life and death. The messages arising from radical political Islamists are framed to cajole Muslim communities living in Britain into believing a particular social construction of their problems. Certainly the media seem to believe that Islamic youth are being radicalised by perambulatory DVDs- for example Patience Wheatcroft writing in the Sunday Telegraph (2006): 'The Government is right to be seeking ways of countering the fiery propaganda of the radical Islamists who have found such a receptive audience in Britain' or headlines like "Suicide bomber CDs woo martyrs to Iraq" (Jaber and Allen-Mills, 2005).This study suggests that vulnerability to Islamist propaganda, and its calls to suicidal action, lies not with the moderate British Muslim citizen, but more likely with an eccentric group of probably young male British Muslims with fragmented self-identities and the desire to enhance their faith. Some formats of propaganda appear more effective than others.

Further quantitative research is needed to investigate these phenomena, which we hope can be initially stimulated through the five propositions outlined in this paper. Government social and market research managers and media/PR practitioners in a position to commission further research in this area will wish to consider these propositions further. Therefore, we offer a call to arms to market and social research managers to work with government agencies, the media, academia and other special interest groups, to develop a research agenda to further investigate this crucial area so as to counter security threats to British citizens of all ethnic persuasions and inform a more appropriate set of foreign policy stances. The threat, to British society in general, to British Muslim citizens in particular, needs to be explained before it can be contained; while it may be counter-intuitive to suggest that theory should precede action, this may be, at this moment in history, the most appropriate formula. Critical

marketing researchers should also be stimulated to consider other negative uses of marketing in society by considering how propaganda is used in both the commercial and social settings to direct a company or organisation's agenda, regardless of the customer or audience's wishes.

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Appendix 1

Below is the list of the five audio-visual clips used in this study, specially selected from thousands on the memritv.org website. Each clip is briefly described with a more detailed analysis outlined under several headings for each title as follows:

Clip 1: A bridegroom turns into a suicide bomber in an Iranian TV music video, broadcast by IRIB/Jamm-E-Jam3 (Iran) – Diffused 28th October 2005 (3 mins 25 secs).

Analysis:

STYLISTIC CONVENTIONS

Again the stylistic conventions are drawn from MTV and from consumer advertising, with the viewer at first deluded, deliberately, into thinking this is indeed a pop video or consumer advertisement. Boy and girl look lovingly at each other, what sounds at first to be ostensibly popular Iranian music is played, yellow ribbons are placed on the car. Is this a wedding? The soft-focus conventions, the sexiness, the sentimentality are all apparent, but they are not selling perfume, they are selling suicide - murder.

SURPRISE

Signs begin to appear: something is not quite right, this is something different. Much is made of the loving interplay between man and woman. The car is being loaded. Perhaps they're going on honeymoon? Recognition arises first in the form of puzzlement - what is the mechanical mechanism in the boot, why is the woman tearful? Iranian pop music also contributes to our perplexity since it is associative with a mode of relaxation/indulgence, not martyrdom. It is only when we see that he has left her to drive towards a military checkpoint that we realise that something is amiss. Suddenly the soldier group at the checkpoint splits in half, terrified: to reveal an Israeli flag behind them. It is only now that our mounting suspicions are fully clarified, this is a suicide mission and a suicide bomber. Parting with the beautiful young woman is symbolic of what he was leaving on this earth.

What is significant about this 'advertisement'- for that is what it is- is the element of complete surprise: it is the way our expectations are played with and manipulated.

Secondly, the high production values: this superior technical control is a reminder that this is a product not of a semi-submersible terror group, but an Iranian television channel and, by extension, the Iranian nation-state. But this is a secular/political and not religious statement; there is no overt mention of God even though the act of 'martyrdom'- in fact violent suicide- is endowed by radical Islam with religious associations. The effect is chilling. The message - this is war to the death. Israel is something to be extinguished, an enemy to be massacred.

PARODY

Is it also parodying and sending up Western consumer culture? Certainly it is using the symbols and rituals of consumer culture to sell Jihadi martyrdom operations. The semiosis - even the length- could be that of a consumer commercial evangelising fragrance, for example. We cannot say how far- indeed whether at all- all this is deliberately ironical, or how far it represents a serious attempt to enlist the symbolism of secular comfort to the most radical of political causes.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives focus on the needs of internal Iranian consumption - obviously they seek to rally Iranians to the Palestinian cause and express the Government's hatred of Israel and its support for martyr operations, but why (recruiting potential bombers is perhaps not an objective, they have enough of such people)? Underlying this is the thrust to create internal Iranian political solidarity/social integration by the construction of an external enemy, and Israel fits, or can be made to fit, the bill. This has elements of both integrationist and agitation propaganda.

Clip 2: Palestinian Children clash with an Israeli soldier in an Iranian animated movie, broadcast by IRIB/Jamm-E-Jam 1 (Iran), diffused 28th October 2005 (2 mins)

Analysis:

This Iranian cartoon is a version of a basic foundation myth of Western culture - the myth of David versus Goliath. Unlike some of the earlier clips we have reviewed, there is no sense of 'the other' since in this case the producers have gone out of their way to make an explicitly western media consumer product. The children in the cartoon are entirely western in dress, and in fact they are white. These are well-drawn cartoon figures and the clip exhibits high production values. It is a sophisticated,

stylish, individualistic piece of animation, for example the way the boy hero's face turns from grief into psychotic rage, or the final twist- the Cyborg Israeli- splits open to reveal Uncle Sam, the true enemy in the video- in fact quite literally the enemy behind the enemy.

The brief story begins with children throwing stones at Israeli troops, one of whom advances towards them menacingly. Their pathetic little rocks are powerless against the Israeli giant, who simply proceeds to machine-gun the whole lot of them. He does not really figure as a person but as a Cyborg, and his face seems to be made not of skin but of steel. At this point the remaining boy, infuriated and grief-stricken by the massacre, picks up a sling, inserts a stone and throws at the advancing Cyborg. He reels, cracks open and inside him is revealed a corpse-like figure of Uncle Sam himself. Israelis are thus dehumanized, and the subtext is that Jews murder children. This tape functions as psychological compensation for the continual humiliation of the Arabs - good versus evil, children against a Cyborg, Arabs versus Israelis. The story is so basic- the weak against the strong, bullied against bully- and retells in any language. The boys killed so casually arouse our outrage. The theme of revenge is a satisfactory- this story of revenge and the triumph of intense intelligence over dumb brute force. The theme is also the rationalisation and inherent logic of martyrdom. Consequently, this clip is an example of agitation propaganda.

Clip 3: Al-Qaeda Leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri claims responsibility for the London bombings, discusses elections in Afghanistan and States: "Reform can only take place through Jihad", broadcast by Al-Jazeera TV (Qatar), diffused 19th September 2005 (5 mins 35 secs)

Analysis:

RATIONAL/ POLITICAL

The act of physical argumentation is punchy, but well-controlled, and primarily a political argument and the effect is indeed more politician than rabble-rouser, ambushing our expectations. His tone is pithy and rational, perhaps surprising in the Vicar-General of what many see as a messianic creed intent on world dominion; what he offers is an animated and articulate flow of argument to convince the waverers which ties all their grievances together.

TECHNIQUE OF SERIAL ASSENT

Individually the points he makes are plausible as a stand-alone, they can gain our assent and that is the rhetorically clever thing. It is the conclusions he draws, that is to say Jihad is the answer, which are fallacious apparently flowing from the cumulative force of the individual propositions but in reality a complete non-sequitur. This is the old-school rhetorical technique of gaining agreement with serial individual propositions, leading to an ostensibly logical conclusion and then the addition of an overview which integrates them. The meta-synthesis is that there is a global conspiracy against Islam, that all the attacks on Islam are interconnected and inspired by the same source; this is the coherent integrating perspective, that is, the one great, imperial idea which clarifies and simplifies a whole variety of complex issues into one coherent and universal concept.

EXPOSE HUMBUG

He poses as a pitiless exponent of the Western humbug. This is an attack on their alleged evasiveness, hypocrisy and double standards and they are the locus of blame for all middle-eastern suffering. He attempts to prove that the elections in Afghanistan (and by extension democracy in general) were a sham. With the casuistry of a barrister picking holes in an opponent's case he criticises the UK for insufficient legalism in its pursuit of terror suspects; this verges, given the source of utterance, on the surreal.

DRAMATURGIC

He poses as the animated, slightly pedantic pedagogue: with a professorial air he clearly is an Al Qaeda 'thinker' and provider of pseudo-intellectual justification. Persuasive, silver-tongued even, he doesn't raise his voice. His gestures are economical, he looks to the left, off camera and not directly at it, as if he were being interviewed. As a communication source, he appears both plausible and credible.

Clip 4: Mohammed Sadiq, one of the suicide bombers who carried out the London bombings in a video-taped message: "Our words are dead until we give them life with our blood", broadcast by Al-Jazeera TV (Qatar), diffused 1st September 2005 (2 mins 27 secs)

Analysis:

CAUSE/ ACCUSATION

Sadiq was leader of the July 7 bombing group, and this tape is both a hymn to revenge, and a self-eulogy. In a nutshell his message is very simple. You're killing 'my' people (i.e. we are part of another nation that has a presence in your country) therefore I'm killing you. The secondary message is that 'this is for real' and that you are being punished for putting in place this government. The central premise is that 'you' have an irrational hatred of 'his' people and seek to kill them, and that this is all part of a global conspiracy against Islam; separate and unconnected conflicts are thus linked, conflicts in which, undoubtedly, Muslims are the victims; Britain thus becomes partly responsible for sufferings in, say, Chechnya or in Kashmir, even though it has no power of decision or action there. The culpabilities of all powers are elided, just as the victimhood of all Muslims is elided.

PERFORMANCE

Sadiq is articulate but the style is that of the quotidien ranting political activist/ sectarian; this harsh, raw performance, the hectoring manner and crude aggression, the tedium of the 'message' are not however alien or culturally 'other'. Sadiq's strong Yorkshire accent serves as a chilling reminder that he might well be one of us, and that terrorists take all types. Nevertheless, as a persuasive performance this fails, given the unlikeability of character projected and, specifically, what we instantly recognize as the classic bullying persona. He has neither the discipline nor the dramaturgic capacity to think through the kind of performance that would be most persuasive to target groups; he seems scarcely able to control himself, so full as he is of rage and nervous energy, a finger-jabbing, paunchy figure whose body writhes uncomfortably around.

INCONGRUITY

The effects are also incongruous. A message, any message, as a semiotic system has intentional and unintentional components; for example it gives a meaning, but it gives off a tone which might be at variance with the meaning. In this instance the Jihadi case at its most murderous is delivered in a broad Yorkshire accent, an accent which carries a set of class and regional meanings and associations independent of the context in which it is used. The context, what is given, may be global Muslim Jihad, but what is given off is the persona of an infuriated Yorkshire plebeian (nearer perhaps to a truth of the situation than we realize). And message is always an

amalgam of what is given and what is given off.

The totality of that symbolic system is a meaning incongruous to the point of theatre of the absurd - Yorkshire accent, British proletarian persona, Islamic dress and suicidal bandana, praise for his founts of inspiration Bin Laden and Al-Zawahiri. The incongruous effects are furthered by mention of paradise - so much at variance with violence and the essentially political nature of the message, and with the vocabulary of Muslim reverence, specifically the 'duah' which this suicide bomber proffers to Allah.

LANGUAGE

The verbalisation is, like the angry rhetorical tone, somewhat anachronistic with its sub-Marxian reference, for example to 'the masses', the jargon of old agitation propaganda. But this combines weirdly with the postmodernist language of cultural criticism, for example the concepts of spin and discourse, so that a veneer of pseudo-education frames the presentation.

RITUAL

The self-projection is via a set of what have come to be prescribed as the Palestinian-defined rituals of the suicide video - the bandana with Arabic inscription, the Islamic dress, the homage to the leaders of the movement and the invocation of his deity, Allah.

AIM

Sadiq's aims are to: 1) inject fear; 2) justify; 3) inspire cohorts and emulators, converse with the Jihadi community; 4) embellish the deed itself (Bakunin's 'propaganda of the act'), action is not enough anymore and terrorist acts no longer speak for themselves but need further articulation via the persona of the terrorist and the rhetorical case he chooses to make for his action.

Clip 5: Al-Qaeda Internet news broadcast celebrates U.S. hurricanes and Gaza pullout, reports Zirqawi's Anti-Shiite campaign and chemical mortar shells in Iraq, broadcast on The Internet, accessed September 2005 (4 mins 56 secs).

Analysis:

MODERN

What is perhaps most remarkable abut this clip is the contemporaneity of its stylistic posture, in fact to the point (whether deliberate or not) of pastiche. The way the graphics flash and morph are utterly modern, in imitation of a conventional satellite channel or even MTV perhaps, or the advertising industry. The attempt is to impress us, by technological sophistication, with the idea that this is an advanced organisation. This is a corporation that is logo: terrorism as Brand X. And just to refresh our memory the clip ends with all those slogans and brand identifiers again; these reveal a self-conscious understanding of the role of symbolism and imagery as meaning signifiers and identity-definers in a media age. What we actually then encounter after the logo display is a news- reader at a desk reading the news notes, from the terrorist perspective. This gives us such a jolt: since it is their perspective on our society using our symbol systems, such as the symbolism of news reading impartiality, where the assumption is that news is not a social construct but a scientific given that somehow exists out there in tangible form.

There are a series of objectives however? The aim is also to show Al Qaeda in business as a virtual nation with its own national television news. He not only reads the news, there are also film clips from various parts of the world, as there would be in any conventional news. This suggests, quite deliberately, the globalisation of Al Qaeda, its global reach and its global perspective. This then is a western cultural interface product. There is however, whether intentional or not, a sub-text. The image and the overall impression is spooky: strange incantations, darkened backgrounds, golden sword motifs; for viewers who have not been schooled in these symbol systems the impression is distinctly other-planetary, the feeling of having encountered a parallel universe. The voice and music, the sound produced, low and long, almost a protracted hum, the chant-like incantation seem whether deliberate or not very sinister. What is probably unintentional is the absurdist nature of what often appears to have become a Monty Python spoof: suddenly a news-reader with a masked face pops up, dressed in black T-shirt with big arms. The incongruity effect is such that the whole event appears as mimicry, a pastiche of the rituals of western media, almost as if a comic sketch. This is the world according to Al-Qaeda, and it has value because we learn a lot about the Al-Qaeda perspective. For example, while praise is larded on Al-Zirqawi for his resistance in Iraq, scorn is poured on Shiites as collaborators. There is much infantile gloating over Katrina with film clips which he turns into Allah's vengeance; all are Americans objectified thereby as enemy and there is no capacity to see them as suffering human beings independent of the associations of the nation they were born into.