

Marketing Theory, June 2009, Volume 9, Number 2, Pages. 227-241

SELLING TERROR: THE SYMBOLISATION AND POSITIONING OF JIHAD

**Nicholas J. O'Shaughnessy,
Queen Mary, University of London**

**Paul R. Baines
Cranfield School of Management**

Address for Correspondence:

Dr. Paul Baines
Cranfield School of Management
Cranfield, MK43 0AL
Tel.: +44 (0)1234 758041
email: paul.baines@cranfield.ac.uk

Keywords: propaganda, semiotics, positioning, terrorism

Abstract

Public speculation has turned to how terrorists are made. One increasingly attributed source is propaganda (see Powell, 1967), the 'propaganda of the deed' - physical violence - but also the audio-visual. Terrorism is a language of symbolic action: in the choice of the victims, in the choice of terrorist act, the drama created and the various official responses sought. We are in a new era, when the terrorist act does not simply speak for itself via its symbolism, but is amplified through a vast constellation of modern media. We explore the symbolism inherent in the construction of specially selected Islamist audio-visual propaganda made available on the internet today and seek to access the 'meaning' of terrorist visualities through semiotic analysis, particularly using the Positioning Triad (Baines, Fill and Page, 2008) and the deconstruction technique (Derrida, 1967) to encourage a new thread of political marketing/propaganda research. We conclude that a common theme projected in our sample appears to be that of the West as permanent aggressor, with Muslims depicted as piously aggrieved for the wrongs done unto them.

Accepted for publication, *Marketing Theory*, 2009

SELLING TERROR: THE SYMBOLISATION AND POSITIONING OF JIHAD

Introduction

In this article, we argue that terrorism is a genre of symbolic communication; a deviant new form of political marketing/propaganda. The creation of symbolism is the key terror strategy, now and in history. Terrorists have always sought targets which resonate with meaning: terrorism is an imprecisely calibrated language of symbolic communication. Targets are carefully selected by their representational value and the message communicated. Moreover this imprecisely calibrated language of communication and persuasion has deep roots in history right through to the Anarchists, Fenian Brotherhood, Sinn Fein, and the various national liberation groups right up to Al Qaeda itself today.

But the argument goes beyond this. We have not only, in Russian anarchist revolutionary Bakunin's famous phrase, the propaganda of the deed, but, extra to this, the amplification of the deed: articulated through globalised electronic media. This new reality is a penumbra of communications and propaganda media, internet videos, text videos, audio recordings and print publications. No terrorist group has spoken like this before; the previous vocabulary of terror, for example, the terse IRA or ETA announcements about the iniquities of British or Spanish colonialism, seem anachronistic. The point is no longer solely the terror deed but the visual celebration of it. The symbolism exists at two levels: 1) the deed itself and 2) the many ways in which electronic communication enhances and retails that deed to the global audience.

Through the evolution of terrorism into a deviant sub-branch of political marketing, we now face a global insurrection, based on the core notion of an existential threat to the Islamic faith. The idea that terrorist organisations not only understand the importance of media but use it assiduously in their own especially branded communications is now unquestioned (see Kimmage, 2008). The media savvy Taliban in Afghanistan propagate their perspective using DVDs and audio/video cassettes in different regions of the country using a team of press spokesmen (Coghlan, 2006). Certainly, the Taliban understand the 24/7 news cycle, by distributing material to Al Jazeera in Qatar on a daily basis, since they are 5 hours ahead of London and 10 hours ahead of Washington (Taylor, 2003: 317).

The terrorist insurrection is not confined to one geographic locality or fed only by a series of local grievances, but takes its motivating force from global media. The implications of this for global security are very serious. The article argues that nothing can really be done until the mediatised/ marketing nature of the insurrection is thoroughly understood. We argue that while there are no simple solutions, a part of any solution must be the development of a counter-narrative, one as compelling as the deviant terrorist narrative, and sustained and refreshed also through global marketing channels. The threat is universal because not only Western countries are involved in counter-insurgency operations concerning disparate Islamist terrorist groupings; so are the governments of the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, Russia, China, Somalia, Sudan, Morocco, Egypt,

Pakistan, India, and so on. We use the word terrorist because these groupings are mostly engaged in violent struggle against legitimate governments and their citizenry.

Our theoretical perspective is that the ideology of the terrorist is embedded in these physical and visual texts that they produce. The inference is that they must be understood: what drives the terrorists, what is their worldview, their version of reality? While orthodox marketing ideology resides in the notion of customer focus, in the case of terrorism we have a different issue; the motives, the understandings, of the producer are if anything more significant than their impact on the consumer, reversing the normative truths of marketing. It is the message that they are selling, their positioning that we should seek to understand. So the focus must be on producer as well as on consumer.

The Symbolism Of The Deed

The difficulty arises in determining exactly what it is that terrorists want to say. Firstly, there is the outrageous nature of the atrocity itself, the register of the depth of hatred. Another symbolically-enunciated message is that the state cannot protect you, and in the case of the Al Qaeda, the humiliation of the Superpower. Bin Laden himself described the events of 9-11 symbolically when he proclaimed: "These young men... Said in deeds in New York and Washington, speeches, that overshadowed all other speeches made everywhere else in the world. These speeches are understood by now by Arabs and non-Arabs -- even by Chinese" (Anon., 2001).

The innocence of the victims of the atrocities is also deliberate, the fact there is no discrimination and the victims, says the symbolism, are people exactly like yourselves, not the elites but the ordinary mass, who can be stuck anywhere, any time. So terrorism emerges as a symbolic language of persuasion. Other aspects of this symbolic language include the arousal of public thirst for revenge, so authorities will be persuaded into a grossly disproportionate retaliatory act, which serves to radicalise the tepid and latent popular support for the terrorists in their base.

Richardson (2006) endows terrorism with an historical pedigree, via three case studies- the Zealots of ancient Judea, the Assassins of the medieval middle-east, and the Thuggees, worshippers of the goddess Kali via ritual murder. In all these cases, it was in the meaning of the deed symbolically that counted, the choice of victims, the occasion when the deed was perpetrated, the manner of its publication and the message sent to the broader community as well as the specific targets among leadership cadres. In other words, the core of the terrorist act was symbolism, not instrumentalism. In no sense can these deeds be seen as making either an independent Jewish nation more possible, or a pure Islamic regime on earth or the extension of the power of the goddess Kali. But a rational calculus played no part in their planning, what mattered was intrinsic meaning and public visibility.

Yet there are fashions in terrorism. For example in the 1970s and 80s, hijacking became more popular, such as the hijacking of TWA flight 847 allegedly by Hezbollah operatives, and the hijacking by the PLO of the Achille Lauro ocean liner. The attraction was the ability to create an unfolding narrative. The terrorists extract from such scenarios

every ounce of drama as the crisis is perpetuated in the full glare of global media. They were a media production, with real props and real people. Effective use of symbolism in terror was also deployed by the Zionist terror organisations Irgun and the Stern gang, which were active in the last years of the British mandate in Palestine. Assassination was an important weapon, killing both Lord Moyne, a member of Churchill's Cabinet, and UN High Commissioner Count Bernadotte. Or massacre: the elimination in 1948 by the Irgun of the Palestinian village of Dir Yassin with the deaths of 254 innocent villagers. The aim was simple, to symbolically articulate the impossibilities of the continuity of British rule. The victims chosen were those likely to resonate most with the ultimate target, British public opinion, to make it tire of the conflict and dream of release. For example two army sergeants were kidnapped and found hanging. The terrorists' biggest achievement was the blowing up of the King David hotel in Jerusalem in 1948, which was the headquarters of the British rule: over 90 people, Arab, British and Jew, were murdered in that event.

Algeria represents the first theatre of modern terrorism, since it was the first time terrorists integrated a propaganda assault, which was global in its object, alongside terrorist acts. Radio Free Algiers broadcast from Egypt throughout the Middle East, while the independence movement, the FLN, sponsored propaganda on a global scale, particularly in the US, with exhibitions and images of alleged French atrocities. One particular convert was Senator John Kennedy (Horne 2006). The FLN established the principle of duality, the bomb and the text. The bombings of the centre of Algiers city, using women bombers, so famously depicted in the film 'The Battle of Algiers', was in fact a good example of the significance of targets symbolism: these included the Air France offices, and the milk bar full of French teenagers dancing. The aim of FLN strategy in Algeria, was to provoke a brutal French counter-reaction. This they achieved, with the effect of radicalising all public opinion in Algeria: the French had won the battle of the Kasbah but ultimately lost the war.

Terrorists look for symbol-rich targets, often places of transience and inter-cultural mixing such as Bali or Luxor. The symbols and symbolic targets are often those least likely to be involved in any active oppression of the terrorist's supporters. The bomb scene, the massacre, are the texts, for example, the 1987 Northern Ireland Remembrance Sunday bombing at Enniskillen, the 9-11 bombs in America, 2002 Moscow theatre massacre, the 2002 Bali bombings in Indonesia, and more recently, the 2004 Madrid train bombs and the 2005 London tube and bus bombs. The point about such events is that they deliberately seek to violate every value and every social norm of every culture, and they succeed: what could be more pitiful than the massacre of hundreds of schoolchildren at Beslan in Russia by Chechnyan terrorists? Hence in terrorism, the symbol is the victim, and terrorists particularly seek out victims who are rich in symbolic meaning: according to Crelinston (1989), "the selection of victims is symbolic and instrumental... The victim is chosen because of whom he or she represents and because their victimisation will resonate with specific audiences". Other commentators also recognize the inherent symbolic propaganda power in terrorist acts, for example, Blain (1988) concludes "human violence is ... an extreme expression of symbol-mindedness". But the question arises as to who is victim because the process of suicide bombing is also self-victimization. In other words, there is a double victim, the target and the suicide-bomber.

Suicide bombing itself is a highly ritualistic event, with a film made of the bomber wearing a bandanna, making homage to God, saying farewell and articulating a highly politicised polemic. There is no military need here. What matters is the meaning of the self detonation. It arouses admiration in the latent supporters of the movement because by definition self-murder is the ultimate sacrifice. It legitimates the act of murder or mass murder through joining the mayhem as victim as well as perpetrator. So, it eludes the charge of cowardice since although it is clearly cowardly to attack innocent civilians, to join them in death at the very point of their murder negates the accusation.

The Symbolisation Of The Visual Image

We have suggested that the point about the Internet and global television channels is that they incentivise terror by significantly increasing the ability to retail terror imagery. Al Qaeda is coterminous with the arrival of global media, especially in the form of satellite television (e.g. Al Jazeera) and the Internet replete with images of Bin Laden and Al Zawahiri. Persuasion can resort to symbolism alone, without any other kind of rationale. This is particularly relevant in the context of the video products of Al Qaeda: a symbol has the flexibility of meaning to which the viewer can bring his or her own imagination. But the reverse is not possible, for example, “a propaganda bereft of symbol structures would be unintelligible as propaganda. Symbols telegraph meaning, and life is constructed around symbols, since they are mental heuristics or shortcuts through which daily life is interpreted and organised” (O’Shaughnessy, 2004).

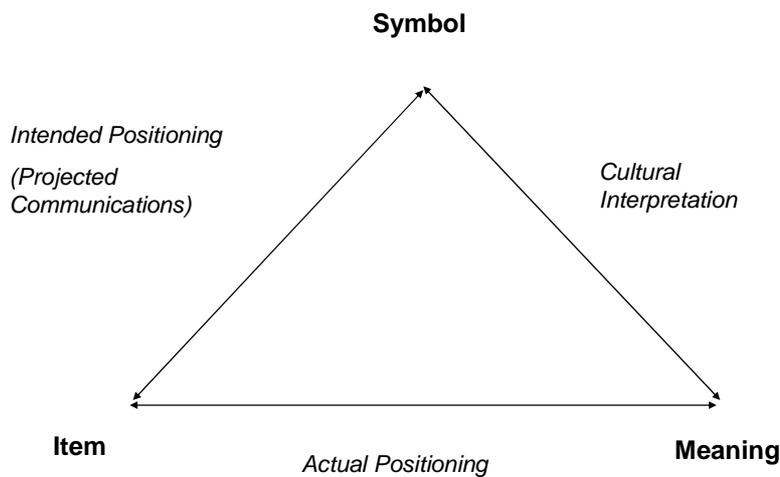
Positioning Intentions And Semiotics

Determining what propagandists and marketers alike are trying to say in their communications is seldom simple because communications so frequently contain ambiguous symbols and messages. Communication can be broken into three separate components, comprising the text of the communication, what symbols were projected from that text, and how a symbol is culturally interpreted (see Peirce, 1931-58). We can perceive this triadic relationship as a three-way interaction between what we call the Item – that which we are communicating something about, the Symbol – what we intend to communicate about the Item, and the Meaning, the interpretation of the symbol within a cultural context in order to understand how communicators might try to position the Item and equally how that Item might end up being interpreted by the audience (Baines, Fill and Page, 2008). Pulling these three items together gives us The Positioning Triad (see Figure 1) – a tool to provide us with a clearer understanding of the two-way nature of the positioning process. While many in marketing regard positioning as how to formulate a message in advertising, the original proponents of the concept (Ries and Trout, 1972) view the process as one of what you do to the mind of a prospect. Positioning is therefore both a function of what is transmitted as well as what is received. The former requires the use of semiotics to decode intended and unintended meanings whilst the latter requires the use of orthodox market research. In commerce, semiotic analysis of competitor advertising has been particularly useful in understanding what messages an advertiser intends to convey, and how they are interpreted within the consumers’ cultural milieu (see Harvey and Evans, 2001, for the example of Guinness). Such an approach could easily be applied to the analysis of terrorist positioning strategy, and to our knowledge is yet to be. We argue that if we can decode the Items (‘Texts’) that the propagandist

projects, then we can decode their positioning strategy and thus their intentions. With traditional market positioning studies (which question audiences on how they perceive something), we do not necessarily see how the company is trying to position itself (intended positioning); what we see instead is how the company actually ends up positioned in the mind of customers (“the Meaning”); two different concepts entirely (see Figure 1). In any event, terrorists are unlikely to tell us the positioning strategies they employ and their effectiveness.

Approaches to semiotic analysis include the use of the linguistic technique of deconstruction, associated with French philosopher Jacques Derrida. In deconstruction, we aim to revisit what the Item is trying to convey by looking at gaps, inconsistencies and ‘absences’ within the communication (Derrida, 1967). The approach employs subjective textual analysis which breaks the communication down into privileged themes (i.e. those themes which are clearly advanced in the text), then determines ‘binary opposites’ (e.g. man/woman, white/black, right/wrong) of those privileged themes as the hidden or absent meaning of the work, and essentially proposes that this is what that work is really trying to say.

Figure 1: The Positioning Triad



Source: Adapted from Baines, Fill and Page (2008)

The semiotic approach has previously been used in marketing to analyse advertising (Scott, 1992; Stern, 1996; Proctor *et al*, 2001). The Positioning Triad (above) seeks to expose the gap between intentional and unintentional positioning in communications, and thus charts a basis for preparing riposte, or counter-attack to, in this case, terrorist propaganda. This work is an extension of previous work undertaken by the authors into examining how British Muslims respond to Islamist video-polemics (Baines *et al*, 2006). The focus however now moves to the interplay between the cultural interpretation and the

intended positioning components (i.e. interpreted through the communication messages/media used) of the Positioning Triad in Figure 1. Rather than assessing the impact of the clips on the subjects that watch them, instead we assess the semiotic strategy of the authors; i.e. to interrogate what their intentions were in devising the kinds of clips that they did. We note, however, that by using the term intended positioning, we are referring specifically to the themes and symbols Islamists are actually projecting rather than the messaging they meant to project. To identify the latter, one would actually have to interview the Islamist propagandists themselves, which is an unlikely possibility.

Methodological Approach

Our exploration of Jihadist video-clips using semiotics is an ‘outside-in’ approach, “asking how things get into people’s heads in the first place” (Lawes, 2002), to determine how Islamist polemicists might project their communications; that is to the interplay between the intended positioning used and the cultural interpretation components of the Positioning Triad. We chose four audio-visual clips, especially selected from a thousand or so on the www.memritv.org website (see Table 1) for semiotic analysis. They were judgmentally selected on the basis of genre (e.g. newsreader format, cartoon, talking head martyr/vengeance, atrocity depiction), and they are not entirely representative of their category, for we did not systematically assess them on a random basis. To take and analyse specific communications is a common approach in semiotic analysis. Rather our work is qualitative, seeking to highlight a phenomenon worthy of new research; namely how to derive the positioning intentions of terrorists when developing their communications, including the acts of violence themselves. We acknowledge that the clips seek multiple audiences; aiming at both a Muslim Western audience (to convert and recruit) and non-Muslim Western audience (to taunt and sap morale), in addition to Middle Eastern Muslim audiences (to unify and integrate). We used one specific medium, audio-visual clips available on the internet, because this has become the medium of choice for many terrorist groups, in particular Al-Qaeda (see Kimmage, 2008).

Table 1: Selected Terror Tapes

CLIP	DESCRIPTION	BROADCASTER	DATE OF BROADCAST DIFFUSION	SOURCE	LENGTH
1	A bridegroom turns into a suicide bomber in an Iranian TV music video	broadcast by IRIB/Jamm-E-Jam3 (Iran)	28 th October 2005	Iran	3 mins 25 secs
2	Palestinian Children clash with an Israeli soldier in an Iranian animated movie	By IRIB/Jamm-E-Jam 1 (Iran)	28 th October 2005	Iran	2 mins
3	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”	Al-Jazeera TV (Qatar)	1 st September 2005	Al Qaeda	2 mins 27 secs
4	Al-Qaeda Internet news broadcast celebrates U.S. hurricanes and Gaza pullout, reports Zirqawi’s Anti-Shiite campaign and chemical mortar shells in Iraq	The Internet	Earliest recorded accessibility, September 2005	Al Qaeda	4 mins 56 secs

Analysis of Selected 'Jihadi' Clips

Clip 1: Suicide Bomber at Israel Checkpoint in Iranian Pop Music Video Format

Core analysis: Symbolism of pop cultural convention is created and then sabotaged, employing it as a Western counter-symbol to emancipate martyrdom

Positioning: This clip aims to inculcate its audience with a sense of grievance and the selflessness and piety of suicide bombing, making it an acceptable act or at least one that can be condoned.

Symbolisation: the stylistic convention resonates with MTV and Western consumer advertising. The viewer is first deliberately deluded into thinking this is a pop video or consumer advertisement. Boy and girl gaze lovingly at each other and 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 we are to discover that this is not Western pop fantasy; it is glorification of suicide-murder. The Iranian pop music contributes to our perplexity, associating with a mood of relaxation/indulgence, but not martyrdom (yet). It is only when we see that he has left his 'bride' to drive towards a military checkpoint that we know something is amiss. Parting with the beautiful young 'bride' is symbolic of what the young man will leave on this earth. Given the strict restrictions placed on music video by Iranian censors, and the messages they contain, the MTV style formatting is surprising but represents a parody of Western-style culture and allows the message to be presented in a less obvious manner. The play on pop music/wedding sentimentality pokes fun at Western ideals. Youth is the target audience, and thus there is also, perhaps contradictorily, an anxiety to appear modern. The tape is also highly ritualistic, i.e. symbolic performance, and contains a cacophony of *recherché* symbols e.g. paper butterflies.

Meaning: the emancipation of martyrdom is conveyed through a medium ordinarily associated with popular Western entertainment. The key objective of this strategy is to honour the *kamikaze* idea; life and death are juxtaposed with death, intending to make it acceptable, indeed desirable and beyond worldly associations (e.g. marriage). The meaning is secular/political and not religious; in fact, perhaps ironically, no overt mention of God is made.

Clip 2: Palestinian Children Versus Israeli Soldier in Iranian Cartoon Illustrating the Biography of a Suicide Bomber

Core analysis: This clip is structured round four clear symbolic appeals which collectively give it meaning and narrative momentum which seek to both explain and emancipate martyrdom

Positioning: This clip identifies Iranian perspectives on the Middle East: 1) identification of Israel as the target, 2) belief in the value of fomenting violence and civil unrest among Palestinians, 3) the suggestion of a proxy war with Israel. 4) Israel is viewed as Uncle

Sam's colony and puppet. The two are the same entity, the relationship of monkey and organ-grinder. The Iraqi cartoon is a version of the massacre of the innocents which has always been powerful as propaganda throughout time. The concept of children as the victims of war arouses both our guilt as war perpetrators and rage as war fighters.

Symbolism: The first symbol is that of David versus Goliath: The cartoon is based on the symbolism of a core myth in Western culture. The direct biblical referent transcends the biblical since this myth is one of few which has migrated from specific to universal culture. It is the tale of the fighting underdog. Myths must have intuitive plausibility for acceptance, i.e. some relationship with the memory of the collectivity that fashions it. Unlike some of the clips reviewed, this one is not outré, and the producers have gone out of their way to make an explicitly Western media product, the children in the cartoon are western in dress, and they are white. The second symbol is that of America's nefarious omnipresence: The cyborg-like Israeli splits open to reveal Uncle Sam, the true enemy in the video; in fact quite literally, the enemy behind the enemy. The third symbol is that of enemy not as human but as a robotic killing machine. The story begins with children throwing stones at Israeli troops, one of whom advances menacingly towards them. Their pathetic little rocks are powerless against the Israeli giant, who proceeds to machine-gun the lot of them. This is no person but a vicious, unfeeling cyborg, his face seems made not of skin but of steel. The fourth symbol is that of justified revenge: the remaining boy, infuriated and grief-stricken, picks up a sling, inserts a stone and lobs it at the advancing cyborg who reels, cracks open and behind him is revealed the moribund figure of Uncle Sam.

Meaning: this is successfully conveyed and done at one remove, i.e. indirectly through a medium ordinarily associated with childrens' entertainment. The explicit indicators of propaganda are missing; the viewer is cleverly seduced into acceptance through the cartoon format application.

Clip 3: Mohammed Sadiq Khan's 7-7 Al-Qaeda Martyrdom Video

Core analysis: a cacophony of different and even contradictory symbols are used in an attempt to terrify Western audiences into believing the enemy is within

Positioning: This text is a sermon of revenge with Mohammed Sadiq self-cast as the agent of retribution, a harbinger of justice through his ultimate act of self-murder. What is intentional is that this is a message from a dead man, who knew exactly what he was doing. The tape is a necessary symbol of the act, the drama, integrated with the self-detonation and articulating its precise meaning (the notion of just retribution is very prevalent in all Al Qaeda propaganda).

Symbolism: The clips are all about symbolizing martyrdom in one way or another. Sadiq imitates Palestinian suicide bombers in the Intifada, and their formal ritualised farewell wherein the martyr-elect declaims histrionically his reasoning behind becoming a martyr and denounces the targets of his self-detonation. The effects of this tape are in the main incongruous. A message, any message, as a semiotic system has intentional and unintentional components (see Figure 1). It gives a meaning, but it also gives off a tone

which might be at variance with that meaning. The Jihadi delivers his lines in a broad Yorkshire accent, which carries a set of class and regional associations, independent of the context in which it is used. Sadiq's strong Yorkshire accent serves as a reminder that he is one of us. The context may be global Muslim Jihad, but what is given off is the persona of an infuriated Yorkshire plebeian (perhaps the real truth of the situation). The totality of this symbolic system is incoherent, Yorkshire accent, Islamic dress, suicidal bandana, and praise for his mentors. The vocabulary of Muslim reverence, specifically the *duah* which this suicide bomber proffers to Allah, is so much at variance with the violent and essentially political nature of the message. As a persuasive performance this is not successful, given the character projected and, specifically, what we recognize as a bullying persona, displayed with finger-stabbing rhetoric.

Here also the rhetoric assumes a default-symbolic character. The verbalisation is, like the angry physical tone, somewhat anachronistic with its sub-Marxian reference, for example to 'the masses', the jargon of old agitation propaganda (see Ellul, 1973)¹. But this combines with the postmodernist language of cultural criticism, e.g. the concepts of spin and discourse. A veneer of pseudo-education frames the presentation.

The symbol of an educated man, at least to some extent, was embodied in the language he used that revealed some articulative capability and conceptual awareness; combined with various symbols of the imminent deed, or what have come to be prescribed as the Palestinian-defined rituals of the suicide video, such as the bandanna with Arabic script. The intended implication is that terrorists are clever, and resourceful, and so must be feared.

Meaning: in this clip, we are introduced to a martyr after his act of self-detonation in an attempt to invoke fear amongst Western audiences. The aim is to taunt Western audiences and possibly to entice British Muslims to undertake similar acts and/or condone his act. In particular, there is an attempt to display suicide-murder as a rational act displaying the highest religious piety but what is likely to come across instead is the hysterical nature of his act and the mismatch of his Islamist stance with his Yorkshire background.

Clip 4: Al-Qaeda Internet 'News Broadcast' Featuring Zirqawi

Core analysis: a conventional symbol of western mediatized discourse is turned into a counter- symbol; a familiar domestic medium becomes hijacked, charged with the energy of enmity

Positioning: This is the world according to Al-Qaeda, functioning as an attempt to provide an alternative news perspective to the typical Western media product. Praise is larded on Al-Zirqawi for his resistance in Iraq, scorn is poured on Shiites as

¹ Propaganda specialists tend to refer to agitation propaganda – agitprop – as propaganda aimed at fomenting dissent and encouraging revenge, race or hate attacks – and integrationist propaganda – integprop - aimed at building a cohesive group identity, e.g. encouraging nationalism (see Bernays, 1942; Ellul, 1973). The Nazi propaganda of the 1930/40s contained elements of both since it encouraged German imperialism and hatred of Jews, Gypsies and many other social groups.

collaborators. There is gloating over Katrina with film clips illustrating Allah's vengeance; all Americans are objectified as enemy. There is a specific attempt to juxtapose a military side of Al-Qaeda with that of a news organization, attempting to legitimate the aims of their organization even though these aims are not explicitly outlined.

Symbolism: This clip also symbolises the positioning Al Qaeda as a virtual nation with its own national television news (complete with balaclavas). These 'newsreaders' not only read the news, but intersperse film clips from various parts of the world, as in any conventional news formatting. This suggests, quite deliberately, the globalisation of Al Qaeda's reach and perspective. This 'newsreader' format gives any non-target viewers a jolt: since it is their perspective on western society that is challenged, but using western symbol systems. this Al-Qaeda communication is replete with symbol-larded texts. What is remarkable about this clip is the contemporaneity of its stylistic posture, the graphics flash and morph in the attempt to impress with technological sophistication, terrorism as Brand X. The image and the overall impression is: ritual 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 and deeply mysterious universe. The voice and music, the sound produced, low and long, almost a protracted hum, the chant-like incantation seem portents of doom for the enemy West. And just to refresh our memory, the clip ends with all those slogans and brand identifiers again, revealing a self-conscious understanding of the role of symbolism and imagery as meaning signifiers and identity-definers in a media age.

Meaning: What is probably unintentional is the surrealist nature of this clip, which acquires something of the quality of a spoof. Suddenly a news-reader with a masked face pops up, dressed in a 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.

Explaining Terror

Leading commentators have speculated on just how effective the visual polemics are as a tool for proselytisation, the effectiveness of these clips is likely to vary according to target group and they may not be provoking the reactions they intend since there are dramaturgic failings, symbolic incongruities and unintended readings. Clearly terrorist organisations themselves think they are effective: the visibility of their self-created imagery surfaces frequently on mainstream media and viewing these images is a ritual of initiation (Razzaque, 2008).

It is quite possible to argue that the entire media product of Al Qaeda is irrelevant to their success in so far as they have succeeded. Firstly, it may well be that potential terrorists respond to the same public media, CNN, as the rest of the public, but they react to those images of death and destruction in a different way. It becomes a question then of self-subversion, rather than other directed subversion via globally retailed terrorist image networks. Self persuasion is particularly important here - for example, Omar Sheikh, the murderer of American journalist, Daniel Pearl, was radicalised by a video about Bosnia

that he watched when studying at the London School of Economics; a socialization process followed by the 7-7 bombers, according to psychiatrist, Razzaque (2008). It is probably the case that the real triggers to radicalisation lie in this socialisation occurring within intimate groups but these groups use such stimulus material to aid in their subjects' mutual radicalisation.

The thesis advanced by Richardson (2006) suggests that terrorists, far from lacking human sympathy, suffer from an excess of it but choose to direct it in perverse and exclusionary ways. Terrorists inhabit a manichean world, they crave a clear bogeyman to destroy, they desire a simple explanation, which will take them through the transition from latent desire to active participation. It is here that the message, rhetoric and symbolism of Al Qaeda are particularly significant, for what Al Qaeda offers is a coherent world view, or what the Nazis described as *Weltschaung*. Thus, it is the coherence of the Al Qaeda vision that is the important selling point, a simplistic, unitary explanation of ostensibly disparate phenomena and the irrational arguments of Islamist propaganda therefore directly appeal, e.g. the supposed existence of a global conspiracy against Islam, an existential threat created by the West to the future of their religion. This explanation hangs together, it has an inner logic since some half-dozen recent international crises and conflicts (Chechnya, Palestine, Kashmir, Iraq, Bosnia, Kosovo) indeed have Muslims as the victims and losers. This inference, from universal victimhood to universal conspiracy, is the core of Al Qaeda and all of its strategies are directed towards communicating this simple message, both rhetorically and symbolically.

Further Research and Conclusions

In this article, our aim has been to begin to document the phenomenon of Islamist propaganda and deconstruct some of the arguments and symbolization used to position the messaging either to unite audiences against a common Western enemy (the Iranian clips), to taunt and sap the will of Western audiences (the Al Qaeda newscast and Sadiq clips) and/or to recruit Western Muslims to the Islamist cause (the Sadiq video in particular) in a small selected sample of communications. We argue that further research should be conducted into this new, but burgeoning, field of political marketing/propaganda, to identify a wider array of common positioning themes aimed at target audiences to build on the work outlined here. We need to identify how terrorist media from a wide variety of organizations are intentionally positioning their message of hatred and Jihad, and how the images and rhetoric they associate with these messages resonate amongst their different target audiences, particularly those from different Muslim sub-cultures in Western countries who are arguably more susceptible to such messaging and symbolisation. In this work, our intention has not been to definitively identify how Islamist propagandists position their communications, instead it has been to identify how they might be trying to do this. Further research is necessary to determine whether the approaches identified in this paper are common across a representative sample of Islamist propagandist communications, by region, by group, and by time period.

We conclude that it seems *prima facie* absurd to speak of terrorist positioning and marketing strategy when the market is death and destruction. But we would advance a

number of significant qualifications. Firstly, although marketing has one definition and corpus of knowledge, there is a public and vernacular concept of marketing, and especially the language of marketing, which has become a language of public and media discourse. Secondly, although the concept of terrorism as marketing, terrorism as a language of symbolic communication, would not sustain an orthodox marketing analysis, not least because there is no two-way dialogue, there is no doubt that terrorists a) have target markets, b) use communications prodigiously to the extent that these matter now far more than the actual terror act itself, c) access channels of distribution, and d) have a market differentiation strategy. There can at least be said to exist in a metaphoric sense, the ubiquitous marketing mix of product, place, price, promotion in terrorist political marketing/propaganda. Perhaps all that is absent at present is the commission of opinion research and the reformulation of communication material based on test audience reaction. But the question that arises is for how long with this amateur approach persist? Just because the political marketing/propaganda used currently is relatively ineffective in Western countries – given the limited successful episodes of suicide bombing– though much more successful in Iraq and Afghanistan – this does not mean we should not study it. We can be sure that terrorist groups will learn and refine their techniques as they gain increasing media experience and are able to translate material which succeeds in recruiting and radicalising Iraqis and Afghanis to recruiting Western Muslims and Muslim converts.

To understand terror, and to combat terrorism, we must realise that it is *per se* a form of communication, and that Al Qaeda, in particular has always recognized this. A leftist view has conventionally been that it is speech of the excluded, of the powerless. This is a legitimate perspective. But it is important to qualify this by saying that the sense of grievance, and therefore the very foundation of terror, can be talked into almost any group. In other words, revenge-action can be positioned. Our thesis is that the desire to kill can, and is, actively being positioned by media savvy terrorist groups². Therefore, we must not delay in researching how and when such symbolization and positioning resonates and how it can be neutralized through counter-narrative.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank MEMRITV.org for making available copies of the relevant clips used in this research.

References

- Anon. (2001), Transcript of Usama Bin Laden Video Tape, December 13th 2001, available at: <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Dec2001/d20011213ubl.pdf>, accessed 1st May 2008.
- Baines, P.; O'Shaughnessy, N.J.; Moloney, K.; Richards, B.; Butler, S. and Gill, M. (2006), "Muslim Voices: The British Muslim Response to Islamist Video-Polemic: An Exploratory Study", *Cranfield University School of Management Working Paper Series*, No.3/06, pp.1-28.
- Baines, P.; Fill, C. and Page, K. (2008), *Marketing*, 1st Edition, Oxford: Oxford

² See article on Al Qaeda's then propaganda chief, the American citizen Adam Yahye Gadahn, subsequently convicted of treason *in absentia* (Doward, 2006).

University Press.

Bernays, E.L. (1942), "The marketing of national policies: a study of war propaganda", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol.6, No.3, pp.236-245.

Blain, M. (1988), "Fighting words: what we can learn from Hitler's hyperbole", *Symbolic Interaction*, Vol.11, No.2, pp 257-276

Coghlan, T. (2006), "Karzai questions NATO campaign as Taliban takes to hi-tech propaganda", *The Independent*, 23rd June, available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/karzai-questions-nato-campaign-as-taliban-takes-to-hitech-propaganda-405133.html>, accessed 1st May 2008.

Crelinston, R.D. (1989), "Terrorism and the media: problems, solutions and counter-problems", *Political Communication and Persuasion*, Vol.6, pp 311-339.

Derrida, J. (1967), *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, trans., Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Dalrymple, W. (2006), *The Last Mughal*, London: Bloomsbury.

Doward, J. (2006), "London bomber's suicide video is 'linked to traitor': Californian masterminded al-Qaeda propaganda, claim terrorism experts", *The Observer*, October 15th, p.12.

Ellul, J. (1973), *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, New York: Vintage Books (trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner).

Harvey, M. and Evans, E. (2001), "Decoding competitive propositions: a semiotic alternative to traditional advertising research", *International Journal of Market Research*, Vol.43, No.2, pp.171-187.

Horne, A. (2006), *A Savage War of Peace*, New York: New York Review Classics.

Kimmage, D. (2008), *The Al-Qaeda Media Nexus*, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Special Report, Washington DC: RFE/RL, Inc.

Lawes, R. (2002), "Demystifying semiotics: some key questions answered", *International Journal of Market Research*, Vol.44, No.3, pp.251-264.

O'Shaughnessy, N.J. (2004), *Politics and Propaganda: Weapons of Mass Seduction*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Peirce, C.S. (1931-58), *Collected Papers*, eds. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss and Arthur W. Burks, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Powell, D. (1967), "The effectiveness of Soviet anti-religious propaganda", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol.31, No.3, Fall, pp.366-381.

Razzaque, R. (2008), *From Human Being to Human Bomb: Inside the Mind of a Terrorist*, London: Icon Books.

Richardson, L. (2006), *What Terrorists Want*, New York: Random House.

Ries, A. and Trout, J. (1972), "The positioning age cometh", *Advertising Age*, 24th April, pp.35-38.

Scott, L.M. (1992), "Playing with pictures: postmodernism, poststructuralism, and advertising visuals", *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol.19, pp.596-611.

Stern, B. (1996), "Textual analysis in advertising research: construction and deconstruction of meanings", *Journal of Advertising*, Vol. XXV, No.3, pp.61-73.

Proctor, S.; Pappasolomou-Doukakis, I. and Proctor, T. (2001), "What are television advertisements really trying to tell us? A postmodern perspective", *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, Vol.1, No.3, pp.246-255.

Taylor, P.M. (2003), *Munitions Of The Mind: A History Of Propaganda Fro The Ancient World To The Present Day*, 3rd Edition, Manchester: Manchester University Press, p.317.

