5

PROPAGANDA AND TERRORISM

David Miller and Rizwaan Sabir

David Miller and Rizwaan Sabir take a very different approach to Seib in the previous chapter and equate public diplomacy, strategic communications and psychological operations as forms of propaganda designed to promote the military capacities of those who advocate them. Propaganda, for Miller and Sabir, is far from simply a question of ideas but a matter of 'political action' that ties together practices of persuasion and coercion. Identifying four key areas of propaganda – its institutions, doctrine, practice and its outcomes – in relation to contemporary examples concerning counter-terrorism raids in the UK, terrorism statistics across Europe and the government organizations dedicated to producing propaganda, they conclude that techniques like public diplomacy and propaganda are far from benevolent forms of political action but part of the 'weaponization of information'.

Key Message 1

Positive: Terrorism is a real and serious threat to us all.

Negative: Terrorism is not a real and serious threat to us all. The terrorist threat is exaggerated by the UK government

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Introduction

The 'key messages' of the UK (and US) government on terrorism can be analysed in terms of their relationship with truth and/or selectivity. However, any analysis of government communications on terrorism must do more than analyse the role of dishonesty by commission (or omission). To illustrate this we need to start with some comments on definitions. Both the terms 'terrorism' and 'propaganda' are heavily contested. Both have, in general usage, a considerable negative charge. Both are subject to argumentation on definition, on who or what is the real 'terrorist' or 'propagandist'.

Although there is much to be said on the problems of definition, both terms can be used in a neutral way – so long as a 'literal' and not a 'propagandist approach' is adopted (Chomsky, 1992: 119). In this sense, we need to immediately introduce the distinction between interest-linked communications where particular definitions are used as 'a weapon to be exploited in the service of some system of power' (Chomsky, 1992: 119) and those which aspire to stick to the facts.

Terrorism, conceived of as actions involving the creation of terror and usually the harming or perhaps deliberate targeting of civilians and non-combatants, is of course something that can be undertaken by both state and non-state actors. Although the term has unavoidably negative connotations, it is not in principle impossible to distinguish between terrorism and non-terrorism by empirical means and using social scientific methods (or even ordinary logic). That is, we must take a literal as opposed to a propagandist approach to terrorism that applies definitions in the same way to groups whether the analyst is opposed, neutral or sympathetic. This sounds elementary, but the history of the discipline of 'terrorism studies' in the academy (never mind in policy or popular discourse) and both open and disguised commitments to great power shows matters are not so simple (Miller and Mills, 2009).
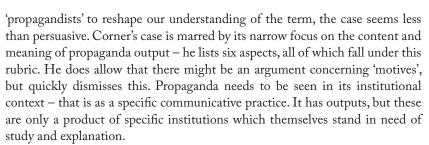
Similarly, the term propaganda carries a heavy negative ballast especially, but not exclusively, from its use in the 1914–18 and 1939–45 wars. It should be noted that as a result, even early in the twentieth century, there were those who aspired to create a profession out of propaganda but who recognized the necessity of renaming it, in order to avoid the negative associations. Thus the term 'public relations' was born (Miller and Dinan, 2008) followed by a whole host of other terms such as psychological operations, public diplomacy and strategic communication. For some, the negative associations accumulated since the early twentieth century have rendered propaganda a term that we must 'think beyond' (Corner, 2007: 676).

Maybe so, but in the era after 11 September 2001 in which propaganda has returned to spectacular effect and in which determined efforts are made by

'propagandists' to reshape our understanding of the term, the case seems less than persuasive. Corner's case is marred by its narrow focus on the content and meaning of propaganda output – he lists six aspects, all of which fall under this rubric. He does allow that there might be an argument concerning 'motives', but quickly dismisses this. Propaganda needs to be seen in its institutional context – that is as a specific communicative practice. It has outputs, but these are only a product of specific institutions which themselves stand in need of study and explanation.

Focusing only on the content of what is produced misdirects attention from the institutional basis of propaganda. Any definition of propaganda that laboured to categorize it in terms of the range of aspects outlined by Corner would miss much, perhaps most, propaganda activity. Mainstream analysts such as Philip Taylor understand this well enough, noting the distinction between 'white', 'grey' and 'black' propaganda (i.e. depending on the degree to which the source is open, disguised or falsified as opposed to whether the content itself is true or false or a mixture) (Taylor, P., 2006).

In practice, descriptions in play are themselves tainted by their involvement in or relationship with legitimation strategies ('propaganda'). It is precisely these strategies that ought to be at the centre of studying propaganda today. These will involve examining communication and no doubt 'discourse', but they should not be limited to that. 'Public diplomacy' is inadequate as a replacement term since it deals only with state appeals to mass (mainly foreign) publics as opposed to the full range of audiences and activities that a proper definition of propaganda entails (see, for example Seib's Chapter 4 in this volume).

Propaganda is more than a question of communication or ideas or discourses. It is a communicative practice, in that it requires and can only be enacted by humans in specific social relations. Torture and killing – or the avoidance of such practices – can be examples of propaganda. Indeed as we will see in this chapter, they are viewed as central parts of propaganda activities by official practitioners. This is encapsulated in the phrase of a leading counter-insurgency theorist, David Kilcullen, as 'armed propaganda' (quoted in Miller and Mills, 2010: 206).

Whatever term is used for 'propaganda', it must be capable of seeing the phenomenon as an 'organic' process, as something which can enable certain interests to be advanced and others limited. This is more than Corner's (2007: 670) reference to 'the metaphorical sense of propagation, of sowing'. It is to suggest the organic process of organizing and developing conduct and outcomes. Propaganda is, in other words, not simply a matter of discourse but a matter of concrete material action by particular institutional interests. It is these properties that make propaganda – still – a superior term to its

available alternatives because it captures its catalytic role in social relations that can result in the propagation of both ideas and outcomes.

Thus, a proper analysis must involve research evidence in relation to these key areas:

1. Institutions: the people and organizations that create or pursue propaganda and the material resources on which they draw.
2. Doctrine: the philosophy and doctrine which theorizes, codifies and organises propaganda efforts.
3. Practice: the activities and outputs of the institutions.
4. Outcomes: in other words the question of impacts.

In what remains we review these four areas.

Propaganda Institutions

There is very little public debate on the propaganda apparatus and few people are fully aware of the extensive machinery that has been built up following 11 September 2001. This machinery has a number of parallel elements between the US and UK, partly through the co-ordination globally between the US and UK. In the US, George W. Bush created the Office of Global Communications in July 2002 which is based on the experience of the Coalition Information Centers (CIC) that operated during the Kosovo and Afghanistan adventures. These drew on the propaganda expertise of the British government and are reported to have been the idea of Alastair Campbell, Director of Communications to Tony Blair (Foreign Affairs Select Committee, 2003). The CIC, for the Afghanistan campaign, was launched in October 2001 with offices in Washington, London and Islamabad and was designed to co-ordinate propaganda activity across time-zones and to ensure that the US and UK (and other governments) 'sang from the same hymn sheet' (Day, 2002). The CIC was made permanent under the auspices of the White House with the creation of the Office of Global Communications (OGC). It was the OGC which fed out the lies about the threat posed by the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq. This included the faked and spun intelligence information supplied by the UK and by the secret Pentagon intelligence operation, the Office of Special Plans, set up by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to bypass the CIA, which was reluctant to go along with some of the lies (Prados, 2004).

From the White House the message was cascaded down to the rest of the propaganda apparatus. The Office of Public Diplomacy in the State Department is responsible for overseas propaganda while in the UK the Ministry of Defence

(MoD) and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) have the biggest propaganda operations of any government departments. Co-ordination with Downing Street is accomplished by means of a cross-departmental committee known as the Communication and Information Centre, later changed back to the Coalition Information Centre as it had been in the Afghan campaign. It is administratively based in the Foreign Office Information Directorate, yet was directed by Alastair Campbell and run from Downing Street (Rammell, 2003: 816). Campbell also chaired a further cross-departmental committee in Downing Street: the Iraq Communication Group. It was from here that the campaign to mislead the media about the existence of weapons of mass destruction was directed. In particular it oversaw the production of the 'September dossier' on WMD and the second 'dodgy' dossier of February 2003 that was quickly exposed as plagiarized.

The propaganda apparatus below this has four main elements. The first is the external system of propaganda run by the FCO; internal propaganda focused on the alleged 'terrorist threat' is co-ordinated in the Cabinet Office by the Civil Contingencies Secretariat; next is the operation 'in theatre' in Iraq; finally, US and UK military psychological operation teams undertake overt and covert operations inside Iraq and Afghanistan. All of these operations have their own contribution to make in the 'war on terror' although most public debate (in the US and UK) in 2003–4 focused on the system of embedding journalists and latterly (in the UK) on the Downing Street operation overseen by Campbell (see Miller, 2004).

In the years since the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, and in particular since the London bombings of July 2005, the UK has further developed its internal propaganda apparatus. This has been done with the assistance of a range of military personnel with career experience and practical and theoretical knowledge of 'information operations', 'information superiority' and 'strategic communications', all of which are terms that have specific doctrinal meanings. The most important element of this internal propaganda battle was the creation in 2007 of the Research Information and Communications Unit (RICU) inside the Home Office, albeit with funding and influence from the Department for Communities, the FCO and latterly the MoD. RICU is part of the Office for Security and Counter Terrorism (OSCT) and describes itself as a 'strategic communications unit' (Home Office, 2009). According to the *Guardian*, the OSCT is 'widely regarded in Whitehall as being an intelligence agency' (Dodd, 2009: 1). This suggests similarities between RICU and the covert FCO-based propaganda outfit the Information Research Department (Lashmar and Oliver, 1998). On the launch of RICU, the *Sunday Times* reported that 'officials deny this is in any way a propaganda department, although one conceded: "It does sound horribly cold war"' (Correra, 2007).

RICU's back story links it to two key military figures in Whitehall: Steve Tatham and Jamie Macintosh. Tatham is the MoD lead on matters of strategic communication. In 2009, he was seconded to the Strategic Horizons Unit (SHU), a unit created in September 2008 and housed in the Cabinet Office (Maude, 2009). SHU is part of the Joint Intelligence Organisation and is charged with scoping future threats. Tatham developed his thinking on strategic communications while at the Defence Academy think tank ARAG, where his 'boss' was Dr Jamie Macintosh who, while at the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory, made 'strategic and operational contributions in the emerging fields of Information Superiority and Information Operations (IS-IO)' (Defence Academy, 2008)

Macintosh co-authored the White Paper and undertook conceptual research design that led to the creation of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat in 2001. This was the body involved in issuing information about the alleged threat to Heathrow Airport and about the 'Ricin plot', which turned out not to involve any Ricin (Miller, 2006). Indeed, according to Archer and Bawdon (2010), nor was there any 'plot'.

Before being appointed the Head of ARAG, Macintosh spent over a year as the personal advisor on Transformation and National Security to Home Secretary John Reid. An MoD biographical note claims that he was 'instrumental' in the creation of the Office for Security and Counter Terrorism (OSCT) and its strategic communications division, the Research, Information and Communications Unit (RICU) (Defence Academy, 2008).

We can conclude from this that there is a significant and co-ordinated propaganda network and that key elements of internal propaganda machinery have been developed by those with experience of propaganda activities in the military. We turn next to the philosophy of propaganda.

Propaganda Doctrine

Information dominance is the name given to the doctrine that integrates propaganda into overall US and UK global strategy. It is a central component of the US aim of 'full spectrum dominance' (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2000: 61–63) that plays a key role in US military strategy and foreign policy. It is best expressed in the Pentagon's Joint Vision 2020 which 'implies that US forces are able to conduct prompt, sustained and synchronized operations with combinations of forces tailored to specific situations and with access to and freedom to operate in all domains – space, sea, land, air and information' (2000: 61).

The presence of information on the list indicates that the US Army views it as 'an element of combat power' (Department of the Army, 2003: iii). To the

outsider, the official debate about how 'information dominance' differs from 'information superiority' might seem arcane, but it is nevertheless revealing. For example, according to Jim Winters and John Giffin of the US Space and Information Operations Directorate, information superiority alone is insufficient: 'at some base point "superiority" means an advantage of 51–49, on some arbitrary metric scale. That is not enough of an advantage to give us the freedom of action required to establish "Full Spectrum dominance"' (Winters and Giffin, 1997). Dominance, instead, implies 'a mastery of the situation' while superiority provides 'only an edge': 'We think of dominance in terms of 'having our way' – 'Overmatch' over all operational possibilities. This connotation is 'qualitative' rather than 'quantitative'. When dominance occurs, nothing done makes any difference. We have sufficient knowledge to stop anything we don't want to occur, or do anything we want to do' (Winters and Giffin, 1997).

This could hardly be any clearer about the agenda of the US military. Traditional conceptions of propaganda as persuasive communication fail to do justice to current conceptions of information war. They incorporate the gathering, processing and deployment of information including via computers, intelligence and military information (command and control) systems. Now propaganda and psychological operations are simply part of a larger information armoury. As Colonel Kenneth Allard has written, the 2003 attack on Iraq 'will be remembered as a conflict in which information fully took its place as a weapon of war' (Allard, 2003). Allard tells a familiar story in military writings on such matters:

> in the 1990s, the Joint Chiefs of Staff began to promote a vision of future warfare in which C4ISR (command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) systems would be forged into a new style of American warfare in which interoperability was the key to information dominance – and information dominance the key to victory' (Allard, 2003).

This is a conception shared by the UK military: 'maintaining moral as well as information dominance will rank as important as physical protection' (Ministry of Defence, 2000).

Propaganda on the home front also takes place under this conceptual umbrella. Although it has gone by a variety of names since 11 September 2001 – including public affairs, information support, information operations and public diplomacy – the emerging term which commands significant policy traction is 'strategic communication', a term used in official circles both in the US and UK (Corman et al., 2008; Tatham 2008). This might sound a

relatively benign phrase and it certainly has less negative connotations than possible alternatives like 'Psyops', 'propaganda' or 'political warfare', but it does have a specific meaning in official thinking. Indeed, the Ministry of Defence has an official 'lead' for strategic communication, Commander Steve Tatham, who has written extensively on what it involves (see Miller and Sabir, 2011; Tatham, 2008). In his view, strategic communication is more positive than the alternatives, by which he means approaches based mainly or solely on force or 'kinetic' power – a term used widely in military circles as a synonym for physical destruction and killing.

Tatham argues that the term strategic communication is widely miscon-strued because it is understood as a replacement term for 'spin', Media and Information Operations or propaganda. Tatham describes these as 'emotive and often inaccurate terms'. Use of such terms is, he writes, 'unhelpful and mires understanding' (Tatham, 2008: 5). Strategic communication, on the other hand, is 'an extremely powerful tool that may hold the key to the dilemma of 21st century conflict, the power of information and opinion and its ability to enable behavioural change' (2008: 20).

This emphasis on behavioural change is central to the 2009 Ministry of Defence counter-insurgency doctrine, which opens its section on 'Information Operations' with a quote from the doyen of contemporary counter-insurgency theorist, David Kilcullen (Ministry of Defence, 2009: 6–2: 'Traditionally, in the course of conventional operations we use information operations to explain what we are doing, but in Counterinsurgency we should design opera-tions to enact our influence campaign.' This distinction between explaining and enacting is absolutely critical to understanding strategic communication. It suggests that propaganda is viewed as part of 'kinetic' operations, an impres-sion reinforced by the MoD discussion of I-Ops (2009: 6–5): 'Information operations will on occasions require an aggressive and manipulative approach to delivering messages (usually through the PSYOPS tool). This is essential in order to attack, undermine and defeat the will, understanding and capability of insurgents.'

Likewise, Tatham suggests that any definition of the concept must 'recognise that the success of non-kinetic effect is amplified by threats of kinetic activity' (Tatham, 2008: 15). In other words, strategic communication is integrated with an overall kinetic strategy and is itself part of a coercive strategy. As Tatham him-self puts it: 'Influence does not mean the exclusion of hard power', nor is it only directed at 'external' audiences or at an 'enemy' (2008: 15), but is also directed at 'internal' audiences, meaning sections or all of the general public (2008: 4). This is a programme not just of persuasive communication – propaganda as traditionally understood – but a highly coercive strategy intended to manage the behaviour of the British public.

Propaganda in Practice

Propaganda in practice does involve the production of 'information', but also crucially involves its dissemination. We see propaganda as a matter, in part at least, of coercion – the 'science of coercion' as Christopher Simpson (1996) termed it in his classic book of the same name. Let us take two examples of the use of pysops in Iraq to illustrate the point. Psyops is presented as an attempt to save lives, thus Major Taylor, the head of 42 Commando Royal Marines psyops unit, described it as follows: 'The main thing is that we are trying to save these peoples lives' (cited in Edwards, 2003). This account is in itself part of the propaganda war as the rest of what Major Taylor had to say reveals:

> We use tactical and strategic methods. Tactically, on the first stage, we target the military by dropping leaflets stating the inevitability of their defeat, telling them they will not be destroyed if they play our game and exactly how they can surrender. On the second wave we show them pictures of Iraqi officers who complied. On the third wave we show them pictures of those people who did not. (Quoted in Edwards, 2003)

The meaning of the messages depends in part, therefore, on the coercive firepower of the coalition. We are in the presence here of coercive threats as opposed to 'persuasion' or 'dialogue'. Any theory of propaganda as a matter of 'persuasive communication' cannot fully accommodate the 'weaponization' of information.

A similar tale can be told about the scandal of the photos from Abu Graibh. These were not really trophy pictures and nor were they pictures of torture in the normal sense of the word. Certainly, they capture images of the degradation of Iraqi prisoners, but what were the photos produced for? Celebrated investigative journalist Seymour Hersh revealed that this operation ran by the name of 'Copper Green' (Hersh, 2004). According to one of his sources 'the purpose of the photographs was to create an army of informants, people you could insert back in the population' (Hersh, 2004). The source also claimed: 'It was thought that some prisoners would do anything – including spying on their associates – to avoid dissemination of the shameful photos to family and friends' (Hersh, 2004). Private Lyndie England, who was in the photos, added further detail saying: 'I was instructed by persons in higher rank to "stand there, hold this leash and look at the camera." The pictures were for PsyOps reasons … They'd come back and they'd look at the pictures and they'd state, "Oh, that's a good tactic… This is working. Keep doing it, it's getting what we need"' (cited in Ronson, 2005: 166–7). The Abu Ghraib photos are

not, therefore, just a record of torture, but an active part in the process of torture – again an illustration of the coercive nature of this kind of propaganda.

Turning now to domestic propaganda efforts in the UK we can note that the pre-eminent body used to 'taint the Al Qaeda brand' (Travis, 2008: 8) is RICU. It does this by co-ordinating and issuing regular guidance on lines to take across central and local government and beyond, by providing advice on language to use and by conducting research on Islam, British Muslims and communication issues. Its four key messages in 2007/8 (with the positive message first and the opposite negative second) were:

> Terrorism is a real and serious threat to us all. Terrorism is not a real and serious threat to us all. The terrorist threat is exaggerated by the UK government

> Terrorists are criminals and murderers. Terrorist attacks against the UK are legitimate

> Terrorists attack the values that we all share. Terrorist attacks are justified by 'Muslim values'

> We all need to work together to tackle the terrorist challenge. The terrorist challenge is primarily a problem for Muslims or Muslim communities to address. (TNS Media Intelligence, 2008)

These messages are core to RICU's activities and frame much official communications. Indeed, in one study conducted for RICU it was concluded that only one government press release in the period January 2007–March 2008 was not 'on-message' (2008: 4). RICU has issued guidance on how to communicate its messages which includes specific advice on ensuring that the government is not thought to be exaggerating the terror threat.
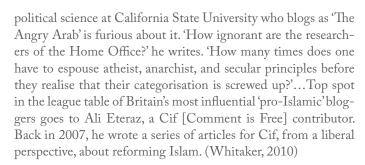
Amongst their other activities, RICU has also funded research on Muslim communities. Between 2007 and 2010, for example, RICU commissioned work on Muslim 'identity and sense of belonging', 'how young British Muslims use the internet', 'how Government messages are perceived by Muslim communities,' 'Islamic Blogs' and 'The Language of Terrorism' (Fanshaw, 2009). One project was funded by an Economic and Social Research Council award to Dr David Stevens of Nottingham University to study 'radical blogs' in a secondment to RICU (see Powerbase, 2011). The report published a list of the top 20 'Islamic' blogs with the inference that these were in some senses 'radical'. However, a number of those listed were not 'radical' or 'Islamic' at all. The *Guardian* noted a number of examples:

> … the man identified in the report as Britain's third most influential 'pro-Islamic' blogger is actually an atheist based in the United States. As'ad Abukhalil, a Lebanese-American professor of

> political science at California State University who blogs as 'The Angry Arab' is furious about it. 'How ignorant are the research-ers of the Home Office?' he writes. 'How many times does one have to espouse atheist, anarchist, and secular principles before they realise that their categorisation is screwed up?'…Top spot in the league table of Britain's most influential 'pro-Islamic' blog-gers goes to Ali Eteraz, a Cif [Comment is Free] contributor. Back in 2007, he wrote a series of articles for Cif, from a liberal perspective, about reforming Islam. (Whitaker, 2010)

It seems that this project – whatever the intentions behind it – ended up by exaggerating the threat from 'radical' blogs. It is to the key issue of the wider media politics of the terror threat that we now turn.

Outcomes

In this section we draw attention to the impacts of propaganda. In line with our argument that sees information and propaganda as integrated into the military and coercive apparatus of the state, we see this as a question not simply of influence on media agendas and content or on public ideas or beliefs, but on the relative balance of forces and concrete policy, military, policing and other outcomes. We focus here on the mid-level case of impacts on media reporting in order to demonstrate how the approach outlined above can be seen as oper-ating via mass media reporting.

It is clear that there is a threat of political violence in the UK from 'Islamist' or 'Jihadi' political violence as evidenced in the London bombings of 7 July 2005, the failed London bombings two weeks later and the attack on Glasgow airport in 2007. The 'official' threat assessment, which was first made public in 2006, claimed that there is a 'severe national security threat' from this source (MI5, 2011). However, data published by Europol (the EU's serious and organ-ized crime prevention agency) and obtained under the Freedom of Information Act shows that the most serious and sustained threat of violence in the UK stems from armed groups in Northern Ireland (both Republican and Loyalist) and not from 'Jihadis'. This data shows that across the EU in the years 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009 there were a total of 472, 583, 515 and 294 'failed, foiled or successful' attacks, respectively. Of these specifically 'Islamist'-related incidents amounted to one, four, zero and one in each year. Thus according to Europol, based on figures supplied by member states, 'Islamist' incidents accounted for 0.002 per cent, 0.006 per cent, 0 per cent and 0 per cent of 'terrorist' inci-dents in the whole of the European Union. In the UK, the pattern is slightly excluded due to the UK government's refusal to give a breakdown for its fig-ures in the year 2008 and 2009 (see Europol, 2011: 9–10). FoI requests to the

Table 5.1   British national press items on 'Islamist' and
'Northern Irish' related political violence and 'terrorism'
2006–2008

Year	Islamist	Northern Irish
2006	3594	1859
2007	3239	1391
2008	2615	1309

Police Service of Northern Ireland produced a very full statistical breakdown of 'terrorist' related activities (Reid, 2010a, 2010b). The Home Office refused to give any breakdown, though we got official confirmation that there were no Jihadist attacks in 2009 (Fisher, 2010; Lister, 2010). We thus calculated that in the four years from 2006 to 2009, there were 371 attacks (defined as shootings, bombings and incendiaries) in the UK related to Northern Ireland (Europol, 2011; Reid 2010) and two attacks by 'Jihadists' (Fisher, 2010). In other words, in a total of four years, 99.5 per cent of UK political violence came from armed Northern Irish groups and 0.5 per cent from Jihadists (Fisher, 2010).
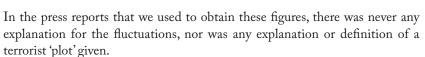
Nevertheless, it is Islamist terrorism that is at the forefront of government pronouncements. We can also show that this is the case in media reporting. Table 5.1 shows the number of items in the British national press on 'Islamist' and 'Northern Ireland' related political violence and 'terrorism' for each of the years.

The figures show that the government's emphasis on 'Islamist' terrorism has been translated into a similar over-emphasis in the press, though the degree of over-emphasis is not as stark. Given the apparent lack of data on even 'failed' or 'foiled' plots and the reluctance of the government to state openly the basis of its threat assessment, we analysed the number of plots said by official sources to have existed from 2006 until 2008 (using full text searches on Nexis UK) and found that the numbers were irregular and inconsistent.

- June 2006, 'at least 20 major plots' (Rayment, 2006: 4)
- July 2006 '70 plots'(Taylor, B. 2006: 20)
- August 2006, 74 plots (Steele et al, 2006: 1)
- September 2006 70 plots (Johnston, 2006: 1)
- November 2006, 30 'major [Jihadist] terrorist plots' (Norton-Taylor, 2006: 1)
- July 2007, 30 plots (Rayment, 2007: 1)
- July 2008, '80 separate terror plots' (McDonald, 2008: 6)
- December 2008, 30 plots (Hartley, 2008: 13)

In the press reports that we used to obtain these figures, there was never any explanation for the fluctuations, nor was any explanation or definition of a terrorist 'plot' given.

Taken together, this suggests strong circumstantial evidence that official pronouncements on the alleged threat from 'Islamist' political violence mis-states the relative risk. However, it also suggests that, on the one hand, security forces are able to regularly disrupt significant numbers of plots while at the same time significant numbers of new plots emerge. On the other hand, it suggests that the definition of 'plot' may be elastic enough to respond to the needs of strategic communication work. We can gain some clues to this by examining the factual basis of one of the most high profile plots reported in this period.

The 'anti-terrorism' raid on a home in Forest Gate in London (codenamed 'Operation Volga') occurred in the early hours of 2 June 2006 after 'security sources' were reported to be acting on intelligence which indicated a 'viable' chemical bomb was being built by two Muslim brothers (BBC News, 2006a). 'Intelligence had suggested', reported the BBC, that it was 'a fatal device that could produce casualty figures in double or even triple figures' (BBC News, 2006a). The *Sun* reported that 'senior officers are convinced' of 'an "imminent" attack in the UK' either 'by a suicide bomber or in a remote-controlled explosion' (Sullivan, 2006). Throughout the raid, and the subsequent investigation, an air-exclusion zone was imposed which banned aircraft from flying 2,500 feet above the house (BBC News, 2006a).

After eight days of enquiries, no chemical weapon was found and no evidence emerged to suggest that the men had ever been involved in terrorism. Both men were released without charge. 'Intelligence sources' told the *Guardian* that the police did not have 'time to bug the house' – 'Intelligence is patchy. Even if it suggests a 5% likelihood of something nasty, we can't take that risk' (Dodd et al., 2006: 1). During the raid, Abdul Kahar Kalam was shot and injured by an armed officer. The story from official briefings was that a struggle between the officer (known only as B6) and the two brothers broke out, in which one of the men tried snatching the gun; resulting in a shot being fired (Panton and Sabey, 2006). Kalam maintained that he was shot without warning or signal (IPCC, 2006: 3; BBC News, 2006b).

The *News of the World* reported a 'highly-placed Whitehall source' as saying: 'the officers are adamant that they did not pull the trigger and have told bosses at Scotland Yard the DNA evidence will prove this' (Panton and Sabey, 2006). Eventually the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) reported that the shot had been fired by the officer as a 'mistake'; perpetuated by the 'bulky clothing and gloves' (IPCC, 2006: 6). They also stated that 'no identifiable fingerprints [were] found on the weapon except those attributed to the officer who would have handled the weapon' (2006: 4). In other words,

contrary to the claims made by the *News of the World*, neither of the brothers had touched the weapon.

We can conclude from this that official briefings on alleged 'plots' are not always reliable, whether by mistake or design. Certainly they suggest that official sources' account of the threat from 'Islamist' terrorism is likely to exaggerate the threat. The extent to which this is a deliberate and inevitable or the result of errors or mistakes is difficult to tell. The pattern of misinformation and deception involved is hardly incompatible with a strategic communication approach to terrorism.

Conclusions

What this tells us is something more than an answer to the question of the role of the state in practising an economy of actualité. We think that it suggests that understanding propaganda in an holistic way allows us to move beyond the narrow conceptualisation of propaganda as a matter of distorted communications to see it in its whole institutional context and to see it as – in fact as it is seen by professional propagandists – a matter of political action. In doing so we have moved beyond seeing it as simply a matter of communication to seeing it as a material and indeed coercive practice: no longer just a matter of 'signification' but a complex mixture of coercion and consent. The issue is not whether this or that piece of propaganda output (or this or that propagandist) is misleading or whether a whole class of communication is 'systematically distorted' (Habermas, 1970) but a matter of a systematic propaganda management of society (Miller, 2005). It is not only a question, in other words, of whether, Tony Blair, Alastair Campbell, George Bush or Colin Powell lied, but of whether they are guilty of war crimes. In that question is a more complex conceptual point which is that there is no fixed barrier between communication and action, between coercion and consent, and between – in the end – propaganda and terrorism.

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