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**The Dark Side of Political Marketing:  
Islamist Propaganda, Reversal Theory and British Muslims**

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**Structured Abstract**

**Purpose**

This article discusses exploratory research into the perceptions of British Muslims towards Islamist ideological messaging to contribute to the general debate on 'radicalisation'. The article discusses the findings of discussion groups in the light of research previously undertaken in the propaganda/psychology fields, from the perspective of Reversal Theory.

**Methodology/approach**

Four focus groups were undertaken with a mixture of Bangladeshi and Pakistani British Muslims who were shown a selection of Islamist propaganda media clips, garnered from the internet. The research is intended to provide exploratory indications of how British Muslims receive Islamist communication messages in order to provoke further research in this critical field.

**Findings**

We propose that Islamist communications focus on eliciting change in emotional states, specifically inducing the paratelic-excitement mode, by focusing around a meta-narrative of Muslims as a unitary grouping self-defined as victim to Western aggression. Early indicators are that some genres of Islamist propaganda may be more effective than others in generating these emotional change states (e.g. cartoons) and some groupings appear to be more susceptible than others. We conclude that our British Muslim respondents were unsympathetic to the Islamist ideological messaging contained in our sample of propaganda clips.

**Research limitations/implications**

The research highlights the difficulties in undertaking research in such a sensitive field. We propose a series of four testable propositions to guide future research looking specifically at whether those subjects who are more likely to be excited by Islamist communication include those with weakly held identities, younger males, those feeling contempt for Western culture, and the use of specific media genre formats.

**Originality/value of paper**

The article provides an insight into how British Muslims might respond to Islamist communications, indicating that whilst most are not susceptible to inducement of paratelic-excitement, others are likely to be, dependent on which genre of clip is used, the messages contained therein, and who that clip is targeted at.

**Keywords**

Propaganda, political marketing, reversal theory, British Muslims

**Classification**

Research paper

## **The Dark Side of Political Marketing: Islamist Propaganda, Reversal Theory and British Muslims**

### **Introduction**

Political marketing is a key sub-discipline traditionally associated with the marketing of politicians and candidates, and its methods and techniques, e.g. opinion polling, focus grouping, negative and permanent campaigning, persuasive audio-visual communications, have increasingly been used by social pressure groups to change government policy. It is also recognised that political marketing, especially the American negative campaigning variety, is a marketing/propaganda hybrid (O'Shaughnessy, 1999). Nevertheless, there is still limited recognition of the importance of emotion in voter decision-making. A more recent, and disturbing phenomenon is the use, albeit in its infancy, of emotional messaging by terrorist groups to recruit and retain members and advocate their own causes. This article seeks to identify how terrorist groups are using emotional messaging, in particular, through audio-visual broadcasts made available on the internet and through broadcast media channels, to recruit and retain members and advocate Islamic extremism amongst select constituent groupings.

International terrorism is a key political issue in Britain today. A *Populus/Times Muslims Poll* (2005) found that 12% of 18-24 year-olds believes 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). Such attitudes amongst British Muslims *could* indicate a reservoir of potential Al Qaeda and Muslim fundamentalist recruits. However, a significant leap in belief needs to take place from indicating support on an opinion survey to sitting on a packed train with a suicide belt-bomb. Al Qaeda as an organisational group has been defined in three ways: 1) as a hard core of militants based in Afghanistan providing other Islamic militant groups around the world with funds and/or training like a university disbursing 'grants' for selected military operations and facilities like libraries and Islamist teaching facilities and 2) like a venture capitalist supporting and funding selected ideas for military operations submitted from a variety of interested Islamist groupings and 3) an organisation funding military operations and propaganda production like a TV production company commissions films, books and newspaper articles from freelance operators, often rejecting the majority (Burke, 2007). Given these commercial parallels, we can talk of the use of marketing/propaganda methods by terrorist groups, which so often accompany atrocious acts like the 9-11 attacks in the USA or 7-7 bombings in the UK, as the 'dark side' of political marketing. There is anecdotal evidence that the process of radicalisation can occur over a short time period (Razzaque, 2008). If we believe the British broadsheet media, Islamic youth are radicalised by perambulatory DVDs and other media aimed directly at them (Jaber and Allen-Mills, 2005; Wheatcroft, 2006). Central to our thesis is the notion that terrorists and their backers are not born but persuaded through propaganda (Powell, 1967), particularly where this is a call to identify with the aims of war (Bernays, 1942; Finch, 2000).

We are evidencing political marketing/propaganda techniques being used to inculcate in vulnerable sections of society an attitude or state suggesting suicide bombing and the violent Jihadi mission of Islamists is honourable and just. Not surprisingly, this secondary narrative concerns many government policy-makers. The question we seek to begin to answer is: are British Muslims persuaded by Islamist propaganda? If so, how might that be and via what genre of media communication? Previous attempts to determine how propaganda imagery and messages are received by their audience have been superficial although O'Shaughnessy (2002, 2004) examined the content of Al-Qaeda videos before and in the immediate aftermath of '9-11', considering such persuasive devices as the use of fast-moving imagery, 'atrocious' propaganda, anti-Semite hyperbole,

and editorial sleight of hand. But no-one has yet investigated how British Muslims *per se* perceive or receive militant Islamist propaganda material.

### **The Communicative Environment**

That a threat to British Muslims is seen to exist is unquestionable. The UK Home Office began to track Muslim opinion through seven working parties after the July 2004 terrorist attacks (House of Commons, 2006)<sup>1</sup>. What the report fails to cover is the core issue of how such ostensibly ordinary Muslims become terrorist sympathisers or what role propaganda plays in apparent personality change. Michael (2004:12) recognised ‘signs of exclusion’ in young Pakistani Muslims. The FCO/Home Office report on *Young Muslims and Extremism* (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. Yet again despite this prognosis, the question arises as to how such apparent ordinary Muslims empathise with suicide-bombers and martyrs-elect. What role, if any, does propaganda play in framing these anxieties and does it *per se* radicalise British Muslims?

One theory which may help is Reversal Theory (Apter, 1984, 2007). Its merit is that, unlike the theories of mainstream cognitive psychology, it is not grounded in an assumption of rational process. Given that much of the existing literature in political marketing assumes rationality and focuses principally on voting at present, rather than generating motivational support or activism *per se*, Reversal Theory provides some understanding of how terrorists seek to develop their activist support bases. The basic assertion is that as arousal increases, it becomes either increasingly pleasant or increasingly unpleasant. When the high arousal is pleasant, there is excitement, and when high arousal is unpleasant there is anxiety. Similarly, when low arousal is unpleasant, there is boredom and when low arousal is pleasant, we have relaxation (O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy, 2002). This means that there are two ways of experiencing arousal, one which runs from relaxation to anxiety as arousal increases, and the other that runs from boredom to excitement as arousal increases. The thesis of Reversal Theory is that we often switch between these two modes. Thus, people seek the arousal of excitement or avoid the arousal of anxiety. In Reversal Theory, the two modes of high arousal-excitement and high arousal-anxiety are mutually exclusive in that people can be either in one mode or the other but not both simultaneously (O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy, 2002). The theory speaks of a ‘telic’ mode, where goal achievement is paramount, or a ‘paratelic’ mode, where the enjoyment of the activity itself is primary. This would be relevant to terrorism, where the intrinsic satisfaction of carrying out the task, vengeance gratified, is often more important than the instrumentality of the terror act. The attractions of terrorism, it follows, are intrinsic not instrumental. Terrorists frequently fail in their actions. Yet participants do not view themselves as failures. We therefore suggest that terrorists are acting within a paratelic mode, which is associated with a high arousal of excitement. In other words, the excitement of terrorist involvement may well be the key to its very attraction (see Apter, 2007, on the role of excitement inducement for those seeking to involve themselves in military combat and crime).

In the telic mode, on the other hand, the reward lies with the sense of moving nearer towards the accomplishment of some objective rather than the involving nature of the activity itself: in telic mode we avoid anxiety with its concomitant high arousal. Anxiety is absent in the paratelic mode, but it is often present in the telic mode, while conversely, there is always some excitement or boredom in the paratelic mode but not in the telic mode. Thus, we can discount the telic mode as usually irrelevant for would-be terrorists.

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<sup>1</sup> Fifty-two people were killed (including the four suicide bombers) and more than 700 injured by 4 separate, coordinated, suicide bomb attacks on London’s transport and bus system.

The logic of Reversal Theory is that there is a movement between these polarities over the course of a relatively short time period, or even during a single day. Typically for example, we may be in telic mode, focused and goal oriented, in the office, but in paratelic mode, sensation-seeking, during the weekend evenings. But, as Apter (1984) stresses, individuals can be more or less permanently trapped in one mode or the other. There are people who can never escape the paratelic mode with its polarities of boredom–excitement, and others are *frozen* in telic mode, typically for example, those people we might describe as ‘workaholics’. In applying this to the study of terrorism and terrorist propaganda, we believe that Reversal Theory has a critical role to play in leading us to a deeper understanding of the attraction of terrorism and the (cyber-) texts that terrorists produce for global consumption to initiate terrorist activism. The value of the theory is as a descriptor of a psychological condition which yields a predisposition to involvement in acts of terror, and which terrorist media intuitively exploits to freeze permanently the potential terrorist in the paratelic mode. They capture its essence and chart a journey from boredom via arousal to excitement. They are targeted at people who feel trapped by boredom, e.g. inter-generational tension, the tedium of unemployment, the absence of a vision of the future. The thirst for excitement, this rejection of a boring life with its sense of entrapment, could act as triggers to join an insurgency and to find out more about Al Qaeda or other Islamist groupings.

Terrorist media as a genre are part of a totality of cognitive context whose product is the high arousal of the paratelic mode and may be said to exhibit the following properties designed to induce and sustain a paratelic mode in conjunction with other stimuli (see Appendix 1):

- 1) *Excitement* - The attraction of Al Qaeda is the allure of excitement, the promise of adventure and thrilling sensations for young men who crave action and glorify heroism.
- 2) *Dynamism* - These narratives are dynamic, packed with drama and the consequences of that action, and are carefully edited for pace and attention span. With their lurid imagery and logo systems, they can be reminiscent of MTV.
- 3) *Decoding* - There is no need for terrorist media texts to be read or decoded through the agency of some prior tutelage. No real understanding of Islam is needed. Their appeal is to the theologically illiterate, for example, Islam like all the Abrahamic faiths explicitly forbids suicide, and yet such media glorify it. In this sense, Al Qaeda for example, is disconnected from its religious roots and making a universal appeal to a universal male: young men have always sought these things, otherwise wars could never be fought. We should not underestimate the power of an appeal whose sole function is to legitimate violent action without excessive elaboration of the justifications. The target individuals may well know little if anything about the political situation of their own locality or of the wider Muslim community and be in no position to know whether it is, in fact, oppressed as suggested or not. The key point is excitement not politics, and the need is to provide a simple, superficial justification for adventure.
- 4) *Power* - People are attracted to power, powerful individuals and powerful organisations even if these are evil, and this means a concomitant attraction to the symbols of power. The very qualities that frighten are those that also attract. Burke (2007) cites Ahmed Ressaam, the failed would-be Los Angeles airport bomber, as actively seeking Bin Laden’s blessing so that he could credit the attacks to ‘the sheikh’.
- 5) *Alterity* – Islamist media create an ‘us’ and ‘them’, alien-like feel. They are a summons to defend ‘your’ tribe, they romanticise violence, and they portray the enemy as the quintessence of evil. It is important to understand the exclusionary nature of this appeal and the huge importance of justified, gratified revenge.

## Methodology

### *Technique and Sample*

Given our intention to explore the emotional resonance of Islamist media clips with British Muslims, we used a discussion group methodological approach given its usefulness in the context of developing collective testimonies and group resistance narratives (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000: 641), and because the format “provides support to its members in the expression of anxiety-provoking or socially unpopular ideas” (Goldman, 1962). The discussion group was introduced into the social sciences in the 1940s to investigate reactions to war time radio programming (Merton, 1987) and political scientists, and practitioners, increasingly use this approach to understand audience political perceptions and motivations (see Gould, 1999), because “they are important for making audible the voices of oppressed people who are demanding to be heard” (Madriz, 2000). The notion that discussion groups will not work for sensitive topics is a myth (Morgan, 1998). But group discussions have another vital role in qualitative research: they are particularly useful in proposition development (Bellenger, Berhardt and Goldstucker, 1976) in the early developmental stage of a discipline. Therefore, our primary aim is to: *Explore the perceptions and emotional responses of selected British Muslim groups towards Islamist ideological broadcast messaging with a view to informing future research in this field.*

We aimed to determine what would be respondents’ perceptions of, and emotional responses to, the content, message and style of the clips. Four discussion groups were conducted: two in London (in Edgware, Bangladeshi women 18-36 years old and Tower Hamlets, Bangladeshi males 18-34 years old), one in the Midlands (Birmingham, Pakistani men, 18-28 years old) and one in Dewsbury (Pakistani mothers, all ages) in areas of relatively high Muslim population density (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Group Characteristics**

GROUP	REGION	NATIONALITY/RELIGION	AGE	GROUP SIZE	COMMENTS
Young Male	Edgware, North London	Bangladeshi Muslim	18-34	4	Comprised 3 Muslims and one revert <sup>2</sup> .
Young Female	Tower Hamlets, East London	Mixed Muslim	18-36	9	Comprised women who had either recently arrived from a Muslim country or had been born in the UK. Some wore the <i>hijab</i> , others did not.
Female Mothers	Dewsbury, West Yorkshire	Pakistani Muslim	All ages	8	2 members illiterate in English/Urdu, 3 English illiterate but could speak Basic English and Urdu literature. Most resident in the UK for 20 years or more.
Young Male	Birmingham, East Midland	Pakistani Muslim	18-28	10	Convened a month after the other 3 groups in August 2006 but before the Heathrow bomb scare.

Respondents were recruited by Ipsos MORI street interviewers in groups of 4-10 participants, with each group lasting 1½ to 2½ hours, using trained Muslim moderators briefed on the sensitivity of the research and the need to reassure respondents (Kay, 2001). Some would-be respondents were wary of participating. Although, the discussion group approach is not without fault (Mitofsky, 1995), for this stage of theory development and given the topic of the research, the group discussion approach was enlightening. Respondents were questioned on their perceived identity, the types of Islamist communications they had seen, and their views of the selected audio-visual clips. Five clips were used, selected from a broad range of Islamist ideological media material (hosted by the Middle East Media Research Institute - memritv.org) to reflect a range of genres of audio-visual material that Muslims might be subjected to in their daily lives (see Appendix 1 for a brief synopsis of each

<sup>2</sup> He became a practising Muslim later in his life and referred to himself in this way rather than as a convert, which he might have taken to mean that he was not a ‘good’ Muslim at some point previously.

clip). Given the exploratory nature of this research, our selection was neither exhaustive nor scientific, instead we seek to explore certain genres of media clip to determine whether some might have more emotional resonance than others. The group discussions were audio-taped and fully transcribed. Discussion groups have limitations in that their findings are not generalisable across the population (see Mitofsky, 1995) but they are very useful in development of theory and hypotheses. It is possible that those with extreme views refused to take part, so there might be an element of self de-selection, which was possible with our Bangladeshi male group. Respondents' views may also have been influenced by the very material the participants watched and discussed: the so-called 'Hawthorne' effect<sup>3</sup>, especially where they had not seen this or similar material previously.

## Findings

Our findings provide an understanding of what the Islamist message senders might be trying to convey to our Muslim respondents and how these messages emotionally resonated. Given the focus of the research, it is important to understand the cultural background of our subjects. To the respondents, practising Islam was 'Jihad' in itself: the struggle to internalize and practice the religion as it permeates their daily lives and interactions, and their identity. For men, it was 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 was described variously as *a way of life*", and *"...the way we eat, the way we sleep, the way we go to the toilet, the way we get up in a morning"*. When considering their own identity, most respondents had complex juxtaposed notions of these which might actually make some more susceptible to Islamist messaging than others, as these comments from the discussion groups indicate:

*"If I were to go to Bangladesh ... it would feel just like a holiday ... 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. I don't really know what being British is."*

*"Getting a British passport doesn't make you British."*

But there was also some evidence of contempt for what Muslims perceive to be British culture because *"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."*

The media clips, readily available to all over the internet, are distributed by two source organisations: a virtual state, Al Qaeda, and a real one, Iranian terrestrial television, and both glorify terrorism. Yet, there are no perceptible ethical differences in the nature of their proselytisation. The distinction lies in the quality of the production values. These media clips are modern. God is marginal in the rhetoric. 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. Behind both militant Islamist propaganda products lies the conviction of a global conspiracy against Islam. The line of argument indicates that global conspiracy must be met by global conspiracy, and it is the perception of a global war to win the freedom and independence of what the propagandists see, and wish to establish as, a trans-national Muslim nation – the *umma* ruled by a *Caliph*. 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 (Ellul, 1973; O'Shaughnessy 2004). Terror organizations are willing to communicate as never before, to articulate their deeds through propaganda:

<sup>3</sup> 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.

*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).*

Consequently, there is now a much greater volume of communication of Islamist Jihadi messaging, particularly using media clips across the internet (Kimmage, 2008). Given our hypothesis that propagandists might be seeking to use Islamist communications to convert bored British Muslims into suicide bombers, we evaluate the discussion groups' responses, with a view to determining how this messaging is emotionally received by our subjects.

### **The Impact of Propaganda**

The responses of the members of the discussion groups to each of the five media clips are outlined in Table 2. 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. The Iranian cartoon and 'martyr' video offer another instance in recalling the murder of Palestinian boys. 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 as Nazi propagandist *Goebbels* recognised as his key task (Baird, 1992).

The very brevity of these media clips suits modern attention spans and sound-bite culture. The images constitute a pastiche of Western consumer media, striking some false chords and encountering credibility problems with more media-savvy British Muslim youth. These are after all visually literate contemporary British citizens whose primary identifier may be Islam but whose perceptual conditioning influences are those of modern Britain. In the lives of the respondents, there are many competing information systems on Islamist and Islamic issues inside communities, families and kinship groups. We can talk of a competitive marketplace of information to win 'hearts and minds', accessible to all its protagonists whether propagandists, governments or special-interest groups.



Table 2: Emotional Responses

CLIP CHARACTERISTICS			RESPONDENTS' COMMENTS			
Clip	Genre	Distribution	Young Males, North London	Mothers, Dewsbury	Young Females, East London	Young Males Birmingham
1	Music Video Parody	IRIB/Jamm-e-Jam3 (Iran)	Characterised as Bollywood style overly-dramatic, with poor music and attractive lead characters. Triggered laughter given modern/funky format and overly anti-Western content. Not felt likely to influence UK Muslims despite clear message encouraging suicide bombing.	Did not understand it, even with the (English) language translation, thinking it to be love story.	Felt it was "a recruitment video targeted at young men". 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.	Respondents' comments guarded, 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".
2	Animated Cartoon	IRIB/Jamm-e-Jam3 (Iran)	Clip "lacked a sense of reality" and was not "likely to influence young Muslims" because it was animation.	Induced powerful reaction, visibly changing moods: one lady had tears in her eyes. They could "feel the pain of the boy, as they were mothers themselves". Clip urged young people to "take action" because of perceived injustice: "If kids see too much of this stuff they take it on board, kids are susceptible".	Clip 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 it as "sinister".	One respondent likened animation to reality of the Muslim's plight, indicating 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". "Capturing military soldiers [sic] is completely different from killing average people living in the suburbs of Palestine".
3	Al-Zawahiri 'Talking Head'	Al Qaeda/Al Jazeera (Qatar)	Clip triggered 'head-nodding', in agreement. Leader felt to have spoken the truth about young Muslim children dying at the hands of the West. Content not considered factual by most and should be taken with a "pinch of salt". Where 'live' footage used (Muslims firing cruise missiles), respondents felt the message likely to muster support amongst those Muslims already corrupted or easily swayed.	Clip not understood, as they did not understand Arabic and the English subtitles were too fast-moving. The speech regarded as "boring".	Clip not well-received. They felt that the speeches and images make the situation worse for Muslims. Notably, this group had less to say than others.	Respondents agreed that America adopted an hypocritical and bullying posture in relation to the United Nations, in relation to pushing through resolutions which allowed the invasion of Iraq, for example: "Up to [a] point, most of what he [Al-Zawahiri] said made sense".

Table 2: Emotional Responses Continued

CLIP CHARACTERISTICS			RESPONDENTS' COMMENTS			
Clip	Genre	Distribution	Young Males, North London	Mothers, Dewsbury	Young Females, East London	Young Males Birmingham
4	Siddique Khan 'Talking Head'	Al Qaeda/Al Jazeera (Qatar)	Mohammed Siddique Khan felt to have been "gravely misguided", having been "brainwashed" by Islamist leaders. The respondents were saddened that he had chosen to commit suicide.	Some respondents had seen this clip before. Condemned violence and the London killings. One respondent indicated it would be wrong to judge an individual for his actions without knowing "the full story". Sympathy subtly extended to him. Something must have happened to him for him to "take such steps". Most 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."	Respondents angry, shocked, "quite shaky", to see educated, articulate young man in this action. "Listening to the words ... sent shivers down my spine". Sympathy for suicide bomber exists: "how and what happens to transform a young person into a terrorist?" and "this feeling of frustration at not being heard, you can see why he does it". Clip most likely persuade those who already feel alienated and aggravated.	Group tended to disagree with the way he reacted but sympathised with his view that Muslims are being oppressed. Siddique Khan'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.
5	Al Qaeda News Bulletin	Al Qaeda/Internet	The <i>faux</i> Al-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.	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'.	Group alienated by the subject's views on Katrina and the joy Al-Zawahiri 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.	Group find this 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.

### Applying Reversal Theory

Next, we briefly consider each of the media clips from the perspective of the application of Reversal Theory and the impact of the media clips on the discussion groups witnessing them, as follows:

*Music Video Parody* – The clip seemed designed to trigger a paratelic mode, and all those elements we identify such as dynamic action are present here. Again, the conscious use of an entertainment format projects excitement. But the symbol-system failed: we have to distinguish between the encoding, that is to say, an intuitive aim to generate a paratelic mode, and the decoding, which in the case of our groups was aberrant. The media clip simply did not work with a Western audience, who found it too crassly manipulative and ingratiating. The focus of the audiences was on the failure of the symbol system.

*Animated Cartoon* - The impact here was not on young men, but on Bangladeshi mothers from Tower Hamlets. It was the only text we showed to have a measurably strong political impact.

Its overt entertainment format and narrative momentum, its speed, seemed designed to generate and sustain the paratelic mode. That it succeeded with one segment in such an unexpected way, demonstrates the subtlety of influence processes, and that they do not fit any stereotypes. Yet mothers are crucial in Islamic society, in determining its values, in influencing its socialisation and in turning a blind eye, or providing encouragement, when sons (and daughters) empathise/sympathise with terror groups.

*Al-Zawahiri 'Talking Head'* – The clip encouraged some general agreement but encountered credibility problems. Notably, two of the groups felt the message was 'boring' and should be taken with a 'pinch of salt' – hardly inspiring the paratelic mode in our groups despite the explicit call to 'Jihad' against the West. Nevertheless, two groups did indicate that the message might resonate with others since 'up to a point it made sense' and might muster support amongst those 'easily corrupted', which psychologists might take as coded language from some in the groups that they themselves could see merit in the message.

*Siddique Khan 'Talking Head'* – Curiously, the groups whilst not being excited by this message themselves could see that others might well be, despite the fact that it does not seek in itself to incite violence but instead to celebrate revenge and to taunt. In other words, the paratelic mode was not explicitly acknowledged by our group members but they could see how it might inspire others who feel alienated or aggrieved.

*The Al Qaeda News Bulletin* - This media clip used a genre which was both mimic and parasitic in adopting an entertainment format. Again, the narrative drive fits comfortably into the paratelic mode, but again there was an aberrant decoding by discussion groups and the media clip had the reverse effect to that intended. Its assumptions, for example, of an indiscriminate hatred of Americans, and not just the American government, was fundamental to any success it might have in generating and sustaining a paratelic mode. But this did not happen. Our groups sympathised with vulnerable Americans. The problem with a western-domiciled audience is that they interpret this media clip and the others differently from how we might infer a Middle Eastern audience might, even though both groups are targets of terror states and organisations.

In summary, we propose that Reversal Theory might help to explain the effectiveness or otherwise of terrorist media clips although the media clips we tested were not effective with our discussion groups. We began this research with the suspicion that the media clips would be persuasive to some degree even with a UK Muslim audience, especially young men. In applying Reversal Theory we sought an explanation of that anticipated persuasiveness. Nevertheless, the symbol systems used and/or decoded by our subjects were ineffective. This does not undermine the relevance of Reversal Theory or invalidate our use of it; instead it implies that western-domiciled Muslims are likely to have limited predisposition to Jihadist sentiment such as that encoded in our test media clips.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

Given the exploratory nature of our research, we outline a series of testable propositions to develop the field. In particular, we need to understand how audiences process emotional political ideological messaging, particularly that from terrorist organisations, from the perspective of Reversal Theory. Propaganda tends to operate as a *coherent integrating perspective*, where complex phenomena are reduced to simple and internally consistent explanatory formula to incite excitement and violent action. Underlying causal unities are perceived where none exist. A common assumption is that Muslims are 'radicalised' by Al-Qaeda and others by their Islamist propaganda; but, on the other hand, an alternative thesis exists that radical propaganda might instead actively create anxiety and repulsion rather than excitement. Do Islamist media communications therefore only appeal to the pre-committed, refreshing commitment certainly but not aiding the further recruitment of suicidal foot soldiers? This is a key question. It is unlikely that vulnerable respondents completely take in all the claims of the propagandist. Rather, they are bored subjects seeking excitement, becoming no mere object of persuasion but complicit in the hallucination of outrage and justice retrieved. There

is likely to be a greater susceptibility to Islamic propaganda amongst those who feel the greatest mismatch between their ‘diaspora’ culture and the ‘British’ culture. This mismatch will probably cluster around the belief that ‘British’ culture encourages excessive hedonism, fornication and drinking and other ‘corrupt’ practices. Our adult audiences *per se* seemed more likely to connect with the emotional 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 might succeed because they function as entertainment, or more precisely, because the format of a cartoon announces itself as entertainment, lowering perceptual defences to paratelic-excitement inducement. Therefore, we advocate the following propositions for further research:

***Proposition 1: Respondents with complex ethnic identities are more likely to be excited (i.e. induced into paratelic-excitement mode) by Islamist ideological messaging than those whose identities are more strongly held.***

***Proposition 2: Inducement into paratelic-excitement by Islamist ideological messaging depends on the subject’s age and gender, with young male subjects those most likely to be induced.***

***Proposition 3: Subjects feeling contempt for Western culture are more likely to enter the paratelic-excitement mode after watching Islamist ideological messages than those not feeling contempt.***

***Proposition 4: Islamist emotional messaging framed in certain genre formats (e.g. cartoons) is more likely to induce the paratelic-excitement mode in subjects than others (e.g. ‘talking head’).***

More needs to be understood about the relative strengths of the various persuasion paradigms on offer. In our study, Al-Zawahiri’s style of rational discourse was impactful to some but not to others. On this evidence, his organization is neither mad nor deluded. Pseudo-reason can be more powerful as persuasion than crudely emotional appeals. The emotional resonance generated in the Iranian cartoon was effective because the cartoons functioned at a more abstract and symbolic level. Therefore, we propose the need to research the impact of this specific format and genre of Islamist emotional messaging on adults as well as considering the emotional impact of interpersonal forms of propaganda diffusion. For example, members of the young female group from East London reported that they had attended events 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*”.

The research reveals some difficulties in researching this cross-cultural and sensitive subject. There are difficulties to researching the persuadability of Islamist ideological messaging; many subjects may not want to acknowledge their susceptibility to paratelic inducement. 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). There are clearly issues of privacy, confidentiality and ethics surrounding this type of research (Hill, 1995) which should be further considered.

## **Conclusion**

Our exploratory study highlights how terrorist groups might be using modern media and political marketing methods to proselytise their message of violent extremism, to induce reversal to the paratelic-excitement mode in bored and dissatisfied Muslims to recruit supporters to their ideological cause. Just as democracies use political marketing to recruit voters, so terrorists can use political marketing/propaganda techniques to recruit sympathisers or even would-be suicide-bombers (i.e. the ‘dark side of political marketing’). This very idea would be incendiary if we did not know the communication process and the supporter recruitment processes to be fraught with

difficulty and ambiguity. British Muslims do not become radicalised solely through a hypodermic needle method of propaganda injected from afar by terrorist groups using internet-based branded communications (see Kimmage, 2008). British Muslim opinion is variegated not monolithic, with strong latent emotions (e.g. sympathy for the Palestinians). Nevertheless, this does not mean that they are necessarily susceptible to paratelic-excitement inducement and sympathetic to violent action. Because we have no measure of how tenaciously those views are held or how predisposed Muslims of different nationalities are to terrorist ideological messaging, we have indicated a set of four research propositions to explore how Islamist messages are received by British Muslims to evaluate their emotional resonance and their potential for paratelic-excitement inducement. By this means we hope to inspire further research in this critical area to aid legitimate governments around the world to design counter-messaging aimed at inoculating their Muslim populations against Islamist terrorist ideology designed to inspire and inculcate violence from within.

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## Appendix 1

See list of clips used in this study in Table A below, taken from the www.memritv.org website.

**Table A – Brief Description and Synopsis of Clips Used Within the Study**

CLIP NO.	DESCRIPTION	BRIEF SYNOPSIS
1	A bridegroom turns into a suicide bomber in an Iranian TV music video, broadcast by IRIB/Jamm-E-Jam3 (Iran) – Diffused 28 <sup>th</sup> October 2005 (3 mins 25 secs)	Uses the stylistic conventions of MTV/consumer advertising. Viewer perceives a pop video or consumer advertisement. Boy and girl look lovingly at each other, what sounds to be 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 used to selling perfume, as increasingly becomes apparent, they are selling suicide-murder. Something is not quite right. Much is made of the loving interplay between man and woman. The car is being loaded. Perhaps they're going on honeymoon? But what is the mechanical mechanism in the boot, why is the woman tearful? Then when we see that he is leaving her to drive towards a military checkpoint we realise something is amiss. Suddenly the soldier group at the checkpoint splits in half, terrified: to reveal an Israeli flag behind them. This is a suicide mission and a suicide bomber. Parting with the beautiful young woman is symbolic of what the suicide bomber is leaving on earth.
2	Palestinian Children clash with an Israeli soldier in an Iranian animated movie, broadcast by IRIB/Jamm-E-Jam 1 (Iran), diffused 28 <sup>th</sup> October 2005 (2 mins)	This is an Iranian cartoon based on the Western cultural myth of David and Goliath. The children in the cartoon are western in dress, and white. The 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 proceeds to machine-gun the lot of them. He does not figure as a person but as a Cyborg, and his face seems to be made not of skin but steel. The remaining boy, infuriated and grief-stricken, picks up a sling, inserts a stone and throws at the advancing Cyborg. He reels, dissolves into a skeleton and behind him is revealed a cadaverous figure of Uncle Sam! These are well-drawn cartoon figures and the clip exhibits high production values. It is a sophisticated, stylish, individualistic piece of animation. Israelis are dehumanized. The subtext is that Jews murder children and the cartoon functions almost as the emotional biography of a suicide bomber.
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 19 <sup>th</sup> September 2005 (5 mins 35 secs)	This is a classical headshot ‘political ad’. The physical argumentation is punchy, well-controlled, and primarily a political argument. The effect is more politician than rabble-rouser. His tone is rational. What he offers is an animated and articulate flow of argument to convince waverers, which ties all their grievances together. Individually the points made are plausible. It is the conclusions drawn, 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. The meta-synthesis is that there is a global conspiracy against Islam, that all attacks on Islam are interconnected and inspired by the same source. The message: Jihad is the only rational answer in a Western-dominated world.

**Table A Continued - Brief Description and Synopsis of Clips Used Within the Study**

<b>CLIP NO.</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>BRIEF SYNOPSIS</b>
4	Mohammed Siddique Khan, 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 1 <sup>st</sup> September 2005 (2 mins 27 secs)	Khan was leader of the July 7 bombing group and this clip is a hymn to revenge and a self-eulogy, recorded before the atrocity was committed but aired 2 months after in a 'talking head' approach. His message is very simple. You're killing 'my' people (the <i>ummah</i> ) therefore I'm killing you. The secondary message is that 'this is for real' and that you are being punished for voting in this government, and presumably its decision to go to war in Iraq/Afghanistan. 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 linked. Britain thus becomes responsible for Muslims suffering in, say, Chechnya or Kashmir, even though it has no power of decision or action there.
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)	This clip mimics CNN or BBC World Service news broadcasts and has contemporaneity in its stylistic posture, to the point of pastiche. Graphics flash and morph in a modern fashion, imitating conventional satellite channels. The attempt is to impress us, by technological sophistication, with the idea that this is an advanced organisation doing the broadcasting. To refresh our memory, the clip ends with all 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. What we encounter after the logo display is a newsreader at a desk reading the news notes, from the terrorist perspective. This gives us a jolt since it is 'their' perspective on 'our' society using Western 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. The aim is to show Al Qaeda in business as a virtual nation complete with national television news suggesting the globalisation of Al Qaeda.