Glocalising Al Qaeda: Or the War(s) on Terror as Intercultural Media Flow?
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Introduction: From Glocalisation to the Semiotics of Intercultural Dialogue
It would now appear that, aspirations of the combatants notwithstanding, there is no single ‘War on Terror’. The fact that in July 2007, the British government officially abandoned the term in order to differentiate its anti-terror policy from that of new premier Brown’s US-friendly predecessor, Blair, is one of several examples undermining the notion of a unified global campaign against the evils of Al Qaeda. What we have instead is a multiplicity of overlapping anti-terror campaigns, each asserting precedence over its rivals with implicit claims such as: ‘our, authentic campaign would never involve a Guantanamo, let alone a Chechnya’; or ‘the half-heartedness of their campaign explains their refusal to contribute to the Afghan mission’, etc. The points at which these campaigns overlap and intersect accounts for the sense of a shared, global dimension (few of them do not feature Al Qaeda, albeit attaching it differing degrees of significance). But because the points of intersection also generate tension and difference they lead to a mutual renewal of global and national dimensions. The debate over whether Iraq’s new Al Qaeda infestation is a consequence, or a vindication, of the American-led overthrow of Saddam, for example, revitalised both US conceptions of the global war on terror, and its assertive belief in its leading role in fighting that war. But it also reinforced continental European portrayals of Al Qaeda as a nebulous threat which benefits from, rather than submits to, conventional military assault.

What these introductory observations reveal, and what has prompted our paper, is the inadequacy of the various ‘glocalisation’ models to the task of accounting for international discourse on terror. Whether conceived in terms of ‘the enhancement of local identity as a reaction to globalising force’ (Robertson 1992), or of the ‘vernacularisation’ (Appadurai 1997) or ‘creolisation’ (Hannerz 1996) of a normative language, the paradigms fall short of providing a convincing explanation for the complex interplay of samenesses and differences at work across the multiple anti-terror campaigns, for the emergence of sameness itself as a function of multiple differences. Thus, the concept of an originary global (whether American-led or more general) mission acquiring domestic ‘nuances’, or meeting with national reactions, when transposed to a local context is simply not born out by the mutuality of national and international which has characterised each individual anti-terror struggle from the outset. For instance, Russia’s (and to an extent, Britain’s) attempts to ‘globalise’ its Chechen (British-born Islamist) problem are portrayed from without as the quintessence of localism (attributed to Russian brutality in the Caucasus and Britain’s ‘illegal’ involvement in Iraq). Conversely, the US coining of ‘9/11’ is as much a highly effective example of individual nation-(re)branding as a genuine attempt to name a global evil.

A more fruitful approach suggests itself in the notion of global discourse on terror as the product of a multi-faceted intercultural dialogue in which a shifting configuration of semiotic systems undergoes revitalisation when one system imports meaning across its boundaries from another. In Iurii Lotman’s account of the process, meaning-generation always takes place on borders; it is here that the encounter of semiotic
systems generates the tension and conflict required for re-semiosis to occur. The dynamism of the border is due to its exposure to ‘extra-systemic factors’, alien elements which the system cannot initially interpret according to its codes (Lotman 1992, 16-17). As extra-systemic narratives, ideas and images penetrate the borders of a system, they are restructured according to that system’s codes which, however, are themselves renewed under the extra-systemic influence. Gradually, the new elements lose some of their dynamism, stabilise and begin to be perceived as having their rightful home at the core of the receiving system (Lotman 1990: 147). In so doing, they supplant the pre-existing rigid and stable elements which, against the vibrant background of the imported elements, appear worn out and automatized (ibid.). Eventually the new elements dissolve in the receiving culture which begins to produce new texts’ according to ‘an original structural model’ (Lotman 1990: 147). These texts are now rendered ready for export and capable, we would argue, of transforming the global configuration of systems (about which Lotman does not write). Lotman stresses, however, that, new meaning must retain some of the difference and tension with which it was originally inflected in order to realise its transformative potential. Internal heterogeneity, he argues, is responsible for the dynamism which is the ‘measure of information and creativity’ in a given cultural system (Lotman 1990, 140, 227).

Whilst we do not have the space here to apply Lotman’s model in full to the question of the dynamics of global discourse on terror, a modified version of certain stages in that model can be perceived to be at work in this context, particularly if we emphasise the notion of a configuration of overlapping and intersecting meaning systems. We need also to stress that the borders of these systems do not always coincide with geopolitical boundaries, and that individual nations may have stakes in several overlapping systems at once. So, for example, on one hand, British media responses to 9/11 centred on the identification of kindred elements (‘shock’, ‘sympathy’, ‘outrage’) based on a shared stake in the broad discursive system ‘civilised, western approaches to terror’. On the other hand, responses also included the perception of a hysterical US patriotism (influenced by wartime memories of Pearl Harbour) which initially remained alien and ‘extra-systemic’ to a local anti-terror discourse founded on Britain’s ‘measured’ approach to the IRA bombing campaign. However, spurred by the London suicide bombings in July 2005, 9/11 patriotic emotionality was ‘recoded’ according to the structures of what Paul Gilroy (2004) has called British post-colonial ‘melancholia’ (the desire, acknowledged as unrealisable, to re-establish a former imperial grandeur to rival US might). What emerged was national pride in the ‘stoic resistance’ of Londoners, reminiscent of British responses to the World War II Blitz. This became bound up with all that we now associate with ‘7/7’, a ‘text’ whose very name owes its origins to 9/11, but which has now been exported to transform the global ‘canon’ of Al Qaeda terror outrages. In keeping with Lotman’s insistence on ‘internal heterogeneity’, the hybrid status of the 7/7 perpetrators as both ‘British-born lads’ of post-colonial origin and Al Qaeda recruits trained on territory inhabited by the 9/11 fugitive, Bin Laden, accounts for their power to affect the popular consciousness.

To cite a less obvious example, one of the consequences of the Litvinenko scandal in Britain was an expansion of the concept of ‘international state terror’ beyond Islamist extremism. Following the ex-spy’s mysterious Polonium poisoning (apparently at the
hands of Russian state security operatives), it now incorporated incidents deriving from the aftermath of the Cold War (much of whose rhetoric has inspired the ‘war on terror’ proper). At the same time, the event was exploited to boost the respective post-imperial self-image of the UK and Russia. The scandal initially occupied an extra-systemic position beyond the discursive peripheries of Britain’s war on Islamist extremism (indeed, television journalists encountered problems in situating it within any familiar meaning system, resorting constantly to the epithets ‘bizarre’, ‘extraordinary’, ‘mysterious’ etc. in reference to it). Once it was drawn into the ever-expanding remit of the security apparatus (thanks to the role of the invisible, Cold War-like, nuclear poison, Polonium-210), it was able to cross those peripheries and add new semiotic value to conceptions of ‘state terrorism’. For Russia, meanwhile, the controversy submitted from the outset to interpretation within a localised anti-terror discourse (owing to Litvinenko’s connections with Chechen rebel leader, Zakaev, and the ex-spy’s own deathbed conversion to Islam). But the intersection of this meaning system with the borders of British security discourse, via the intrusion across its boundaries of the diplomatic scandal that Litvinenko’s death provoked, enabled it to inflect its own anti-Chechen campaign with the revitalising force of anti-western sentiment. Official Russian sources were swift to re-direct the accusation of state terrorism against MI6 and its renegade ‘henchman’, Boris Berezovskii.

Lotman’s emphasis on peripheries implies adherence to a corresponding notion of ‘centre’; indeed, Lotman utilises the vocabulary of centre and periphery repeatedly. It is important for our purposes to differentiate this usage from ‘centre-periphery’ models common in other disciplines (including political science) where the terms are construed geo-politically rather than semiotically. However, we should also note that the examples with which Lotman illustrates his theories (19th century Russian literary reprocessings of the texts of Swiss philosopher, Rousseau, for example) have clear geo-cultural underpinnings. This is not surprising, given that Lotman was writing in a period pre-dating the advent of mass-mediated global communication, a period when intercultural dialogue corresponded more closely to exchanges between geo-linguistically bounded nation states. As we shall see, tension arising from the application of Lotman’s model to a globalised environment necessitates an acknowledgement of its limitations. It also points up the need to supplement the model with other theories, and to refer to transnational ‘discursive systems’ (whose boundaries may, or may not, have geo-linguistic attributes), rather than to ‘national cultures’. Equally, however, we shall argue strongly against the abandonment of the model which, as our case studies indicate, retains much of its original hermeneutic value.

The Implications of Intercultural Flow: From Cross-Cultural Comparison to Synchronic Cross Section

It is hardly surprising that, via the preceding theoretical digression, we find ourselves knee-deep in communication theory, given that both terrorism, and the campaigns to defeat it, are deeply communicative acts: unlike a military assault proper, the point of an act of terror is to send a message, just as a significant element in an anti-terror campaign is to respond to that message (Crelinsten 2002). Likewise, it follows that the global media provide the territory on which this new form of semiotic warfare
should be conducted. In this paper, we will draw loosely on Lotman’s model, modified by reference to the ‘global flows’ theory of Arjun Appadurai (Appadurai 1997), in a provisional attempt to account for news discourse on terror as a function of the dynamic of mass-mediated intercultural dialogue. The provisionality is bound up with the fact that such an approach is in its infancy. David Morley and Kevin Robins have applied their notion of electronic landscapes and global flow to terrorism in its Islamic dimension only in passing (Morley and Robins 1995). Others have focused on terror reporting as mass mediated communication in its comparative, but not specifically its intercultural, dimension (Papacharissi and Oliveira 2008). Bassam Tibi has posited the emergence of a transnational, European Islamic culture founded on the circulation of mediated meaning (Tibi 2002); however, he is concerned with religious belief rather than with terrorism. We are largely in the position, therefore, of designing an *ad hoc* apparatus suited to the task we have set ourselves. In our conclusion, we will indicate how, liberated from its time-bound, geo-cultural ambiances, and filtered through Appadurai’s suggestive, but ‘fuzzy’, global flow theory, Lotman’s model of intercultural dialogue continues to provide an appropriate tool for further investigations of the sort we are undertaking.

An analysis of the intercultural terror discourse dynamic as a whole in a short paper is impossible. We have chosen to concentrate on one short period of time (January-June 2007) within a media space which covers a geo-political spectrum across Europe: from the UK to Russia, via France. The main national television channels of these 3 countries (BBC 1, France 2, Channel 1) offer fruitful potential for exploring the dynamic for three reasons: 1) each nation has a significant Muslim population and has been the target of terrorist activity; 2) each distances itself (but to differing extents) from the US post-9/11 master narrative and situates itself in relation to a Euro-zone possessing its own structure: an implicitly, and loosely, bounded zone of media discourse *about* Islamist terror which we posit as a concomitant to Tibi’s notion of ‘Euro-Islam’; 3) each has a different political and media system, forms different political allegiances, and experiences different modes of engagement with terror.

The method we propose is comparative, but *not* with a view, as in traditional cross-cultural analysis, to identifying discrete (Russian, French, British) angles on a fixed object (Islamic terror). Rather, by comparing how terror incidents in one location are reported in others, we attempt to establish a synchronic cross-section through a dynamic ‘flow’ of meaning in order to point to ‘traces’ of that flow apparent at single moments (though on occasion we follow the direction of the flow across sequences of news reports). As Appadurai puts it, we have to recognise that modern cultural forms are ‘polythetic’ in their ‘overlaps and resemblances’. Without this step: ‘[W]e shall remain mired in comparative work that relies on the clear separation of the entities to be compared before serious comparison can begin’ (Appadurai 1997: 46).

Within this framework, Islamic terror is no longer a self-equivalent entity, but a co-constructed set of meanings inflected with multiple, shifting, accents. The War on Terror, meanwhile, is the (equally unstable) discursive effect of an intercultural dynamic in which particular media players (BBC, France 2, Channel 1) operate within, and at the intersection of multiple, overlapping zones of terror discourse (an Anglo-American zone, a continental European zone, a British zone, a Russian zone, etc), each operating as bounded semiotic systems as described by Lotman, and each
vying for dominance. It is, we believe, precisely by focusing on the national television reporting of terror incidents in space construed as ‘other’ that we can access the zonal boundaries at which the intercultural dynamic is at its most intense and new meaning is created. We do not, however, propose to apply the Lotman model mechanistically, but to highlight those aspects, or stages, pertinent to the particular case in question.

We should emphasise that the discursive zones we refer to are fluid and imprecise, and since they are constructed within transnational media systems, they do not correspond exactly to their geo-political equivalents. The Anglo-America terror discourse zone does not always coincide with the Anglo-American political alliance, though they may share properties in common, whilst, in the case of a state-controlled media system like Russia’s, there may be a very close matching of semiotics to geopolitics. Moreover, single media systems may position the national stance that they purport to represent (we should be clear that the British ‘nation’ as represented by the BBC by no means necessarily equates to British national identity per se) within multiple zones simultaneously, or in sequence; mediated Britain may be located variously within an Anglo-American, a British, a European, a Western, or a global anti-terror discourse. Finally, since we are dealing with semiotic rather than geopolitical entities, the boundaries of a single discursive zone (‘European discourse on terror’, for example) are dependent on the position from which they are being constructed, and these positions may differ considerably. For all these reasons we make no attempt to force the zones to fit the very rigid definitions to which they are, ‘by definition’ antithetical.

Methodology of the Case Studies: Pinpointing the Traces of the Flow

The case studies we have selected range from actual terror bombings involving loss of life (Morocco and Algeria in April 2007), to explosions causing minimal human suffering (Glasgow/London July 200), to averted bomb plots (at a US airbase near Frankfurt in Germany, September 2007), to threats with no foundation whatsoever (Moscow, January 2007), thus spanning the full semantic spectrum from baseless fear to actually realised threat which the term terrorism embraces (Altheide 2006). The selection includes incidents on the soil (or, in the case of French North Africa, ex-colonial soil) of each nation, and one on the territory of another European state; it is therefore also apposite in the range and balance of discursive zones it covers: Anglo-American, British, European, French and Russian. Curiously, but in keeping with the emphasis on semiosis over geopolitics, the North African incidents are more clearly ‘French’ than the Frankfurt incident is German; the former de-emphasises the European dimension in favour of a colonial sphere of influence marked as palpably French, whilst the latter (with its US target) combines German, Anglo-American and Euro-zones. The significance of this will become apparent in due course.

Since we are operating on the territory of television news texts, the specific procedures we seek to identify as contributing to the intercultural dynamic are drawn from media studies frameworks. They include (1) political and ideological reframings (e.g. the Russian media reframing of Chechen terrorism as criminal activity; the BBC portrayal of Russian anti-terror activity as post-imperial revanchism); (2) shifts in, and recurrences of, what Norman Fairclough refers to as the ‘narrative and visual
scripts’ (Fairclough 1995), or recognisable ‘templates’, deployed to mediate between notions of a global Al Qaeda threat and local terror alerts and bombings (e.g. the recurrent British story of the British-born Pakistani boy, seduced from normality by fanatical Islamists and dispatched to the former colonial homeland for terror training); (3) the exporting, importing and transformation of anti-terror lexicon and iconography (the 9/11 to 7/7 transformation); (4) the re-invoking and revitalising of domestic and international terrorist litanies, ‘canons’ and lineages (from 9/11 to Madrid, to Beslan, to 7/7; from Northern Ireland, through the Rushdie fatwah, to 7/7). The combination of repetition (framing, script, canon etc) and renewal (re-framing, shifts in script etc.) maps on to the dual need to accommodate all news events to the sphere of the known, and to reveal in them something of the unknown, and thus onto Lotman’s notion of a discursive system’s penetration by, and recoding of, alien, extra-systemic factors.

In this paper we adduce only a few illustrative examples of the procedures from each case study, focusing, with one exception (whose reason will become apparent), on French/Russian/British reporting on terror events elsewhere, and using domestic accounts for brief comparative purposes only. We aim, through our cursory analysis, to (i) identify significant traces of the intercultural flow (and counter flow) of anti-terror discourse, (ii) glean from those traces tensions and differences in the way that ‘global’ and ‘local’ campaigns are reconstrued within the multiplicity of shifting discursive zones/systems, and (iii) indicate how, by addressing apparent limitations on the intercultural model imposed by its ‘centre-periphery’ connotations, we might preserve its value as a heuristic tool for understanding the global anti-terror dynamic. Our analysis is based on full recordings of reports on the incidents broadcast on the main evening news bulletins of BBC1, France’s Channel 2, and Russia’s 1st channel. For convenience’s sake we employ the term ‘domestic’ to refer to a television news report on an event occurring on the soil (or within the sphere of influence) of the nation in which the report is broadcast, and ‘international’ when the report deals with an incident in a country other than the one in which it is broadcast.

Case 1: French and Russian Reports on Glasgow/London

Let us begin, then, with a few examples from French and Russian reporting on the two linked incidents which took place within days of each other in London and Glasgow in June/July 2007: the discovery of an unexploded bomb near the ‘Tiger, Tiger’ nightclub in London at the end of June, and the bombing of Glasgow airport at the beginning of July carried out by driving a 4x4 vehicle into the terminal. France’s *Journal de 20 Heures* and Russia’s *Vremia* both initially framed the incidents within the context of Britain’s role in Iraq:

> Great Britain is exposed first and foremost because it is a privileged ally of the Americans. It is engaged also in Afghanistan and above all in Iraq. And so I think that the Iraq question weighs heavily (Reporter, France 2, 29/6/07);

> It was a homemade bomb, and, as the police themselves say, bombs just like this one are exploding on the streets of Baghdad (Reporter, Channel 1, 29/6/07)
At this point, and despite the invocation by Journal of 7/7, 9/11 and Madrid, and by both channels of the spectre of Al Qaeda, the British anti-terror campaign is located at the peripheries of the ‘authentic’ War on Terror (what for Britain is a marker of its commitment to the international campaign is for France and Russia a localised distortion of the ‘true’, effective way of fighting terror). In keeping with this gesture, both Vremia and Journal de 20 Heures also introduced a ‘Dangers of Islamophobia’ frame, featuring interviews with local Scottish Muslims fearing an anti-Muslim backlash; in Vremia’s case, one interview was with a white female Muslim convert defending the ‘normality’ of the Islamic faith and furnishing an ethnically acceptable image of the Muslim believer, often portrayed domestically in the guise of the aggressive, North Caucasian boevik (or, as in the UK, as the alienating, fully veiled female): ‘We Muslims strive for peace. My neighbour convinced me of this and I have persuaded all my brothers to convert to Islam’ (Channel 1, 7/7/07). France 2, meanwhile, featured an interview with a Muslim man exposing the full extent of Scottish prejudice against his community: ‘You never stop hearing “The Indians, the Indians!” But it’s not us.’ (France 2, 1/7/07). The French approach is reinforced when, in a later report speculating that the recent inclusion of Salman Rushdie, author of The Satanic Verses, in the Queen’s honours list might have provoked the London attack, the reporter reminded viewers that ‘many Muslims were insulted by this honour’, contradicting the strong ‘free speech’ frame applied earlier by France 2 to Europe’s own ‘cartoons of Muhammed’ scandal (France 2, 6/7/07).

The distancing strategy, however, is deployed hand in hand with a familiarising approach ensuring that the events in Britain remain within the range of French and Russian anti-terror discourse. Journal included in its reporting of the London bomb vox pop clips of French tourists giving vivid accounts of the security operation and praising the determination of Londoners not to be cowed by the threat. This points to the coexistence alongside earlier suggestions that the London population was in something of a post 9/11 panic, of a French internalisation of the 7/7 ‘stoic resistance’ text (France 2, 30/6/07). The first on-location Vremia report on the London incident sets the scene by inviting viewers to imagine just such traffic disruption on the Garden Circle (Sadovoe kol’tso) area of Moscow, and by highlighting COBRA’s role, invoking the military security frame familiar to Russian viewers of Vremia’s reports on domestic terror (Channel 1, 29/6/07). The co-presence of distancing and familiarising techniques points not to contradiction and incoherence, but to a nuanced recalibration of the inner structure of the respective anti-terror discourses as they receive and reprocess each new terror incident to cross their boundaries from the intercultural media flow.

That the recalibration is far from smooth in its operation, however, is confirmed in the difficulties that Journal encounters in its attempt to code the Glasgow bomb in terms of the global Al Qaeda threat. Once it became clear that this was not another 7/7 committed by Islamicised British citizens, the channel struggled to identify a mediating narrative, resorting to a stark either/or dichotomy lacking in resonance:

The first scenario is that the terrorists were recruited and formed by Al Qaeda leaders. The second is that the terrorists decided on their own to
prepare the attacks, which explains the amateur method a bit … A second scenario no more reassuring than the first. (France 2, 1/7/07)

As the story of the infiltration of British hospitals by fanatical Islamic doctors from the Arab world emerged, and the international manhunt unfolded, the BBC’s own account shifted in mid-stream, abandoning the radicalised Asian youth script (‘News from the Middle East …helps radicalise angry young men in Britain and Europe …A small violent minority then head over to Pakistan ..’; BBC 1, 1/7/07) for a tentative new, hitherto uncited script: that of the international ‘sleeper cell’ lying dormant at the heart of a trusted UK institution: the NHS (‘Were people sent here as sleepers to infiltrate the NHS and to be activated later, or were they radicalised here in Britain?’; BBC 1, 3/7/07). The sleeper cell has the virtue of on one hand belonging to the familiar stock of cold war lexicon, and on the other, of revitalising the self/other tension connoted by the ‘parasite’ trope: ‘our lad who has become infected with the alien ideology of Islamism’ is now re-expressed as ‘the alien doctor who has managed to infiltrate our collective body’. Later BBC accounts of the Glasgow/London incidents use the new elements (characterised initially by the newsreader, Hugh Edwards, as ‘bizarre’, ‘dramatic’ and ‘unprecedented’; 30/6/07) as a means of re-canonising the status of 7/7 with whose anniversary the incidents are repeatedly linked.

The ‘sleeper cell’ term is adopted by Journal and repeated several times with alternatively ‘smug’ and sympathetic evaluations attached to it (‘France also had dealings with these cells, but dismantled them before they took effect’; France 2, 29/6/06; ‘The level of infiltration by these doctors into British hospitals is pretty impressive, pretty frightening. A sleeper cell which took time to gather confidence to go into action’; 3/7/07; ‘In the airports and the stations the security measures are draconian. ”Doctors of Terror” was the headline of the Evening Standard … What has stupefied Great Britain is how these brilliant young students could have ended up in terror camps’; France 2, 2/7/07). This alternation confirms its status as translation mechanism between the French/European and British/Anglo-American anti-terror discourses. As Lotman argues, intercultural dialogue requires that the language of the self contain ‘islands of otherness’ in order for it to translate into the language of the other (Lotman 1992, 19). The oscillatory movement of French news discourse first away from, then towards, the sleeper cell trope (which both differentiates and aligns France with the UK) exemplifies its status as just such an island in British anti-terror language as perceived from the French viewpoint. Significantly, however, it does not feature in the Vremia reports which refer instead in disinterested, semi-ironic terms to the ‘so-called doctors’ plot’ (tak nazvyamymy zagovor vrachei), suggesting that the incident remains a semiotically weak element beyond the peripheries of the Russian anti-terror campaign.

Later reports from France, by contrast, exhibit a significant shift, particularly with respect to the securitisation frame. Early bulletins adopt a critical distance from the British obsession with security, commenting on the intrusive impression created by the ubiquitous CCTV cameras (‘the omnipresent surveillance cameras in the British capital’; France 2, 29/6/07; ‘the numerous surveillance cameras positioned in this part of London’; France 2, 30/6/07), emphasising that draconian security measures are powerless to prevent determined suicide bombers (2/7/07). Later bulletins, however,
focus on the growing debate over the need for CCTV in France; interviews with proponents and sceptics balancing out only marginally in favour of those who place British success in thwarting and apprehending terrorists in the context of individual freedom issues raised by CCTV:

The government … is in favour of a vast plan to install cameras, notably on public transport, evoking the British model of fighting terrorism [our emphasis]. The National Committee on Information and Freedom … does not condemn in principle these cameras, but asks us to be vigilant about their implications (France 2, 9/7/07)

The identification of a new mediating narrative script, accompanied by new lexicon, reveals the trace of the French recalibration and an accompanying shift in the semiotic structure of the Euro-zone: from de-authenticating and distancing the British ‘model’ as the French reporter refers to it, the Baghdad connection now brings Iraq to the periphery of the Euro-zone and serves as the conduit by which the CCTV-security meaning complex, an initially alien, extra-systemic element, might enter and revitalise it. The apparent contradiction across the sequence of French reports marks out the trajectory of this intercultural flow.


BBC coverage of the series of Al Qaeda bombs to rock North Africa (first Casablanca in Morocco, then Algeria) in April 2007 offers an instructive reverse mirror image of French treatment of its own domestic alert. A BBC framing of both the incidents constructed almost a month after their occurrence is in terms of the economic poverty and adverse social conditions that produced Islamic extremism. The onsite reporter refers to ‘disaffection, poverty and high unemployment’ as ‘providing fertile recruiting soil for Al Qaeda’ (BBC 1, 18/05/07). This is in sharp contrast with the radicalisation scripts which now dominate BBC accounts of British Islamism. Still more striking is the interview with an ex-Islamic terrorist who retains radical sympathies. The report emphasises the dangerous undercover nature of the interview, the suspicion that it attracts from the Algerian government and the former terrorist’s ‘understanding of Muslim rage’ (BBC 1, 18/05/07). By contrast, the immediate post-event coverage of Journal de 20 Heures included an interview with a French-speaking Muslim family victimised by the terror attack, linking the recent threat to a long lineage of North African terrorist activity dating from the colonial struggle (12/4/07). Contrary to its reports on domestic terror alerts, but in alignment with French treatment of the Glasgow/London episode, the BBC here explores the Islamic perspective ‘from within’.

But the mirroring effect is not attributable to a British-French version of mutual Schadenfreude. The gesture is only one step in a discursive procedure made fully apparent towards the end of the BBC report and featuring footage in which the camera looks out across the sea, from a fictionalised Al Qaeda viewpoint, accompanied by dramatic commentary referring to Al Qaeda’s new proximity to the European continent, and followed by the US ambassador’s specific warning of the Al Qaeda threat to France, Italy and Spain (BBC 1, 18/5/07),. The viewer is now invited to adopt the Islamic perspective in order precisely to realise the renewed threat that it
poses to a Europe in which the UK is included. The incorporation of French North Africa within the purview of the British War on Terror locates the incidents at a newly dynamised periphery; simultaneously, the self/other structure of the internal Muslim threat undergoes a corresponding recoding to similarly revitalising effect as intercultural engagement generates an increase in intra-cultural tension. At the same time, the US-British angle is brought to bear on a continental perspective implicitly constructed as lacking Anglo-Saxon awareness of the full extent of the global Al Qaeda threat (the BBC report opens with crude, provocative graphics in which post 9-11 cut-out figures of Bin Laden and his henchmen are superimposed on a map of North Africa).

The French bulletins offer a further interesting parallel with BBC reports on the Glasgow bomb; in each case the domestic accounts feature extensive (and invariably dramatic) eyewitness mobile phone footage which is downplayed in (or absent from) the respective international coverage. In the Glasgow case, amateur footage of the burning 4x4 acquired iconic status and recurred ad nauseam from report to report. Whilst there are no doubt good practical reasons for this, it would also seem that domestic coverage of terror bombs favours visuals from the ‘internal’, localised viewpoint of the private citizen as a means of rendering the threat posed to the individual more vivid. This is in contrast with the ubiquitous graphics accompanying international reporting and featuring genericised images of Al Qaeda/Bin Laden superimposed upon maps of the evil network’s latest target (in the case of North Africa, all 3 channels eventually resorted to these). The chasm between the two types of imagery indicates the vital importance of verbal narrative as both mediator between global terror network and local terror outrage, and as translation mechanism facilitating the flow of anti-terror discourse across semiotic boundaries.

Russia’s Channel 1 devoted significant attention to the North African incidents, headlining with the Algerian bomb (Channel 1, 11/4/07). Also of note is the proliferation of terms used to describe the terrorists: ‘Islamist’, ‘extremist’, ‘terrorist’ and ‘boevik’ all occurred, and in a context in which the reporter is pre-empting his western counterparts in asserting the likely guilt of Al Qaeda: ‘There is no doubt that those responsible are Islamist extremists, the militants (boeviki) of Al Qaeda’ (ibid.). Rather than connoting imprecision and distance, the abundance of terms points instead to a familiar litany instantly recognisable from domestic reports on North Caucasian guerrilla activity. This, along with vivid and shocking close-ups of blood on the floor of village dwellings abandoned by victims of the terror campaign, is part of a general ‘domestication’ strategy aligning Vremia much more closely with France’s Channel 2 than with the BBC. The opening lines of the report focused on Putin’s condolences to the victims, and on the fates of scores of Russian nationals in Algeria. An interview with a Russian expert in Middle Eastern affairs was included to bolster domestic interest. Like Journal, Vremia linked the bomb to a long line of terror activity, referencing (also like Journal) the role of the Salafiste branch of Islam (as Vremia cites Saudi Wahabbism as the source of inspiration for Chechen terrorism in order to reinforce its global credentials, and distinguish it from the ‘moderate’ Islamic population within Russia).

The continental postcolonial dimension proves conveniently importable by a Russian regime bent on suppressing its own postcolonial problems in the North Caucasus. For
the BBC, the incident facilitated a reorientation of the peripheries of its terror discourse sphere towards the Euro-zone, but at the same time, a revitalisation of its imaging of British domestic Islam, and the superimposition of a re-vindicated Anglo-American perspective on that of a newly threatened continental Europe. For Russia, it drew in attributes identified at the peripheries of a putative global campaign towards its North Caucasian war on terror; the Russian report also incorporated tell-tale references to ‘cells’ – iacheiki – of Al Qaeda terrorists, along with generic, internationally circulated footage of bearded Al Qaeda leaders and extremist website pronouncements in Arabic script. These complex formulations point to the multi-directionality of intercultural flow. For in a globalised era in which footage from national media broadcasts is invariably disseminated internationally, it is far from straightforward to determine whether the BBC is importing the Algerian case to revitalise British war on terror discourse and re-position it closer to the Euro-domain, or transmitting the ‘Al Qaeda in Africa’ trope as a rhetorical device to remind other anti-terror warriors of the validity of Anglo-American vigilance. Equally, Russia’s Channel 1 is able simultaneously to import Algerian Al Qaeda to re-authenticate the North Caucasian campaign for its domestic audience, and superimpose a re-genericised version of the latter on international conceptions of the global War. The direction of flow becomes still more indeterminate when we bear in mind that, in the case of anti-terror discourse, domestic authentication often requires internationalisation rather than localisation (British audiences are likelier to be won over by the UK’s controversial War in Iraq if they can be persuaded of its relevance to the global Al Qaeda threat).

Case 3: French/British/Russian Coverage of the German terror alert, September 5, 2007

A clearer case seems to present itself in the BBC’s coverage of the foiled German bomb plot on September 5th, 2007. First emphasising the extent of the target (Frankfurt Airport, an American airbase and, potentially, all of Germany), the report then highlights the fact that the suspects - 2 German converts to Islam and a Turk - received their Al Qaeda training in Pakistan. The identification of a ‘radicalised at home, trained abroad’ narrative script enables the parallels with 7/7 to be developed in full (the footage from Germany is intercut with 7/7 archival footage) and the security correspondent interviewed by the newsreader even uses the term ‘model’ in his report: ‘The model we have seen here in the UK is transferring to other European countries … a pattern we have seen before…’ (BBC1, 5/9/07). The fact that the terrorists were converts to Islam, the use of the term ‘radicalisation’ and references to a 9-month surveillance period all serve to consolidate the authenticity of the model (the terms ‘homegrown’ and ‘radicalised’ are each used three times across report and interview).

The BBC’s overt referencing of the 7/7 text marks the final stage in Lotman’s intercultural dialogue process and the attempt to ‘export’ it to the centre of the Euro-sphere. At the same time, reminders of the proximity of the anniversary of 9/11, a genericised clip of Muslims praying in mass, and mention of the Madrid bombings and a recent alert in Denmark all serve to locate Europe’s war on terror at the centre of the global campaign. The use of the garish headlines ‘major terror attack’ and ‘global terror threat’ add to the effect. In this way, the Euro-war is re-oriented towards
the Anglo-American campaign as the global War on Terror emerges at the intersection of the two. In a telling repetition, the security correspondent insists at the end of his interview that ‘Europe faces a challenge, the whole of Europe faces a challenge, for some time’ (ibid.). But once again, these very elements function simultaneously to re-ground the British narrative in a broader campaign encompassing mainland Europe. The semiotic flow, here too, is multi-directional.

In Journal de 20 Heures’s account, there is greater emphasis from the start on the American target in the context of a reminder about the approaching 9/11 anniversary. Only the airbase is mentioned and there is no suggestion that Frankfurt airport, let alone other German locations, are under threat (France 2, 5/9/07). At the same time, the incident is framed clearly in terms of Al Qaeda-inspired ‘Islamist terror’. Footage of an extremist Islamic bookshop is accompanied by commentary noting the arrest of an Al Qaeda suspect who has been under surveillance but, other than mention of the similarity of the bomb materials to those used in 7/7, no specific link to the UK is made, and no mediating narrative ventured to explain how extremist bookshops in Germany might lead a German Muslim convert to contemplate a terror assault on an America base. The alert is situated vaguely within the broad parameters of a genericised global war on terror. But, because of the strong US connections, the incident remains at a remove from the centre of the French/European version of the campaign, and lacks the vitality of the British narrative. Most of it is taken up with the comments of German ministers at a press conference – an indication that the incident is being treated in its ‘official’, foreign affairs dimension rather than individualised for dramatic effect. For the BBC, the Frankfurt incident belongs within a newly revitalised, post 7/7 Euro-zone; for France 2, it is represented as belonging within the Anglo-American zone of a broader global War on Terror.

The distancing tendency is still more evident in Russian Channel 1’s reporting of the incident which, like the French account, is taken up predominantly with official press conference footage. The story attracted relatively little attention, lasting only 48 seconds and appearing 5th in the running order (Channel 1, 5/9/07). The visual footage replicates that of the BBC (indeed the close-ups of the bomb-making canisters and footage of the suspects being led away feature in the reports of all 3 bulletins). Some verbal elements are taken from the BBC version (the emphasis on Frankfurt airport), others from the French (the press conference), with no particular discursive strategy in mind. No details of the arrested suspects are provided and the only mention of the London connection is in the words of speakers at the press conference; nominal links to Al Qaeda and Pakistan are established but, in contradistinction to the BBC’s efforts to claim this event as ‘a major global terror attack’, Channel 1 treats it in neutral, disinterested fashion, framing it within the macro-category of ‘foreign news’ (it followed an item on the disappearance of the American explorer, Steve Fossett), rather than that of a more particularised, and domestically relevant, war on terror.

Here, too, Lotman’s model requires qualification. Vremia’s abstract, disinterested approach to the German plot suggests that the more generic coverage of a terror incident is, the further it is from the discursive core of an individual nation’s war on terror. In keeping with Lotman’s emphasis on the need for signs to cross the other/self boundary to initiate semiotic renewal, the absence of markers of local distinctiveness (whether those locating the incident within a shared Euro-domain, or highlighting
affinities with the North Caucasus) indicate that the other’s event has, here, not been recoded within the structures of the self. It carries relatively little new information and remains semiotically impoverished. But it places in question Lotman’s theory that automatisation arises when extra-systemic alterity is translated into the system of the self; Vremia’s account of the German alert seems to represent a static, genericised ‘war on terror’ lacking the traces of an other-self translation process.

Case 4: Russian coverage of the Moscow alert, January 2007

A related deviation from the Lotman model can be identified in Channel 1’s own coverage of the Moscow terror alert in January 2007. For here, it is precisely the abstract, untranslated attributes of an indistinct, global war on terror which have become semiotically active and appropriated as markers of a renewed discourse of the self. Significantly, the Moscow event received no attention on either of the other two channels, but featured in two reports on Vremia, one of them several minutes in length. The latter was very detailed and constituted a check-list of all the procedures we associate with terror alerts: the convocation of the national anti-terror committee, statements from the state Duma, shots of increased police presence at train stations; intensified baggage checks at airports accompanied by interviews with members of the public expressing sympathy and patience, warning announcements in public places, scenes of heightened security around the country, close-ups of sniffer dogs in action, brief references to the issues such alerts raise for democracy (Channel 1, 17/1/07). The newsreader even cites the incident as the first occasion in which Russia has used the colour-coded alert system now common in the UK and the USA (Moscow, we are told, was briefly on red alert). The incident is presented by the Chair of the National Security Committee, cited at length and without comment, as a tutorial in how to conduct a national terror alert according to the idealised global model:

No society, even the most democratic, can defend itself without participating in this process … In Russia for the first time there has been an open announcement about a terror threat, although this is the norm in many countries … In America there even exists a special traffic signal scale of terrorist danger. In principle we can consider that in Russia the highest, red level of danger was announced (Channel 1, 17/1/07)

What is absent from this veritable compendium of the tropes and devices associated with the generic ‘security alert’ media report is any reference to the potential perpetrators. Moreover, the origins of the warnings are equally vague and abstract; they are given as unidentified sources in unspecified western security services. The (presumably Al Qaeda-linked) terrorists and the western security forces tracking them offer mirror images of the abstraction and anonymity they collectively embody. Despite being framed as part of the global war on terror, with references to Russia’s contribution to the ‘unified anti-terror front’, the report is, ironically, entirely localised and ‘Russia-specific’. The purest, most globally indistinct embodiment of the newly securitised anti-terror agenda to be found on any of the 3 channels turns out, by dint of that very indistinctness, also to be the most idiosyncratically local.  

13
Perhaps less unexpectedly, the alert is revealed two days later to have had no concrete foundation: source, likely perpetrators and (potential) event itself all eventually dissolve into the ether. On one hand, the episode can be explained in terms of Russia’s desire to legitimate its operation in Chechnya by assimilating it improbably to the post-9/11 terror agenda; the newsreader’s claim that the security operation in Moscow is ‘no worse than that seen in London after July 2005’ (ibid.) is almost comical in its ‘me too-ism’. But the very lack of conviction that the claim carries, and the theatrical artificiality of the operation, are also attributable to Russia’s position outside the main intercultural flow and counter-flow of anti-terror discourse, of the fact that even the peripheries of its own anti-terror campaign barely intersect with those of the western nations; the distillation of a rarefied, abstract variant of the global security agenda, unsullied by national traits, un-recoded according to the structures of the self and unmediated by local narratives, is a function of this lack of engagement. That it challenges both glocalisation and semiotic theory, according to which the purest, most complete embodiment of a dominant discourse will be found closest to the centre from which it emanated, is in keeping with our analysis of the preceding cases.

Conclusions

Let us summarise our conclusions. First, implicit in all our case studies is the recognition that any attempt to isolate the features of a ‘war on terror’ even at the national/local level is an artificial exercise, given that (i) depending on rhetorical need, national media outlets draw selectively on a plurality of overlapping discursive zones whose boundaries depend on the perspective from which they are constructed, and (ii) anti-terror discourse is organically linked to a network of news agendas which differ from location to location, shifting and change from within. Thus, in Russia’s case, stories from the ‘global war on terror domain’ may be framed within the broader category of ‘events abroad’. In the UK, the increasing securitisation of terror has led to a conscious blurring of boundaries serving to normalise anti-terror strategies as part of a general campaign against threats to world stability (including climate change, cyber-warfare and international crime). This is confirmed by a recent government statement to that effect (see Norton-Taylor 2008), but also by the BBC’s deployment of its security correspondents to report on issues which included, as well as terror alerts, the Litvinenko spy scandal and the arrest of the British teacher in Saudi Arabia over the ‘teddy’ scandal.

Secondly, reporting on international terror incidents – the point at which the transnational circulation of meaning can best be traced - serve a vital function in recalibrating conceptions of the war on terror at all levels (national, regional, global). In particular, we discovered, domestic images of Islamic extremism are revitalised when represented on the territory of the other. Rather than reflecting a hypocritical inconsistency (‘their Islamophobia/our Islamic extremism’), reports from a position located partially within the Islamic perspective facilitate a recoding of the other within the system of the self as a means of reinforcing the threat posed by that other’s alterity, of revitalising a static image of the other with tension imported from the periphery. The recoding maps onto the dual need to domesticate international
incidents by (re)accommodating them within familiar frames, and to emphasise their
deviance from the domestic norm, the ways in which they disrupt the frames.

Thirdly, however, the flows of meaning are multidirectional. This raises the question
of the multiple (and often hidden) addressees of television broadcasts in the global era
(even Russia’s Channel 1 must take account of the likely exposure of its own
audiences to other world perspectives; British reports on North African terrorism and
Russian reports on British incidents are addressed in part to unacknowledged,
rivals/opponents: continental critics of Britain’s robust anti-terror stance; western
critics of Russia’s ‘illegal’ Chechen campaign). But it also indicates the need to
modify the modelling of intercultural dialogue in terms of the transgression of
semiotic borders.

Finally, our case studies reveal an interesting paradox: that the closer to the dynamic
centre of the intercultural flow and counterflow a media system is, the more
differently inflected are its accounts of terror incidents. Conversely, it is the Russian
report on the German terror alert which offers the most predictable and semiotically
redundant account, and it is the Moscow terror alert in which we find the fullest
distillation of the international security agenda, abstracted without mediation from the
intercultural flow. The two, we suggested, were in fact two sides of the same coin: the
more rarefied and abstract the globalised image of international terror as constructed
within one discursive zone, the less its potential for impacting upon the intercultural
flow, the more parochial and local its likely perception from other such zones, and the
likelier it is to ‘instrumentalise’ and exploit global war on terror discourse for narrow
political purposes (Russia’s very distance from the discursive dynamic enables it to
reify and exploit international anti-terror rhetoric as a tool in its strategy to justify its
illicit actions in Chechnya).

The rarefied, global image of the Moscow terror alert, installed at the centre of a local
media sphere without undergoing transcoding at the periphery, corresponds to
Appadurai’s ‘fractal forms’, and to Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of rhizomic
communication systems in which ‘each point is necessarily connected to each other
point’, in which no location may become a beginning or an end, and in which the
whole is heterogeneous (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 7). As Appadurai puts it:

The new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping
disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing
centre-periphery models (even those that might account for multiple centres
and peripheries) … [We should] begin to think of the configuration of
cultural forms in today’s world as fundamentally fractal, that is, as
possessing no Euclidean boundaries, structures or regularities. (Appadurai
1997, 32, 46)

However, it is important to stress that the Lotman model to which Appadurai appears
to offer a useful corrective can accommodate globally mediated meaning, for its
powerful explanatory force rests less on the endurance of bounded geo-cultural
spaces, than on the insistence of the semiotic border as a precondition for the
difference necessary to create new meaning. In the absence of these borders, ‘fractal
forms’ and ‘rhizomic structures’ themselves become no more than empty shells
devoid of meaning-making capacity.
Another corrective to contemporary globalisation theory implied by our analysis is an insistence on the continuing importance of the verbal in mediating and controlling the circulation of international anti-terror imagery. The mismatch we noted between the ubiquitous, genericised clips of bearded Al Qaeda leaders, gun-toting, masked terrorists and genuflecting masses, and the ‘localised’, mobile phone imagery of terror incidents is not adequately explained by pragmatic exigencies (the need for media outlets hastily to generate images in response to sudden events; the relative semantic and syntactic rigidity of the photographic image): the BBC report on ‘Al Qaeda in Africa’ was aired a full month after the events that inspired it; DGI technology now allows for considerable flexibility with respect to the visual image). The mismatch in fact points up the crucial role of narrative scripts, litanies and lexicon as transnational translation mechanisms.

Indeed, the final note we wish to strike is a cautionary one. As Edward Said remarked in a period predating 9/11 by some two decades, one of the insidious aspects of the ‘clash of civilisations’ that many on both sides of the divide would wish to foist upon us is that, if we persist in constructing Islam as a universal threat to the western way of life, it will, in the age of globally circulated meaning, eventually begin to conform to that image (Said 1981). Analogously, if scholars studying the dynamics of global discourse on terror persist in seducing themselves with the notion that the phenomenon is so categorically new and unfathomable as to require analytical frameworks in which the suggestive and elusive takes precedence over the systematic and the established, they run the danger that their object of study will conform to those frameworks … precisely by eluding them.

Bibliography


Hutchings, S. and N. Rulyova (Forthcoming) *Television and Culture in Putin’s Russia: Remote Control* (London: Routledge)


NOTES

1 Reported on BBC 1 10 o’clock News, 2/7/07.

2 It was Scotland Yard who first used the term ‘state terrorism’, referring to the ‘unprecedented’ nature of the crime against Litvinenko. Russian dissident, Iuliia Latynina, then developed the notion in a programme broadcast on the only independent national radio station left in Russia, Ekho Moskvy, proposing that the world can now be divided into those countries which are prepared to torture their enemies with nuclear poison, and those which are not. For details, see http://russophobe.blogspot.com/2006/11/latynina-on-litvinenko.html.

3 For an overview of centre-periphery theory in Marxian political economy, for example, see Wellhofer 1988.

4 Appadurai refers to ‘the dynamics of global cultural systems as driven by the relationships among flows of persons, technologies, finance, information and technology’ (47). He is, however, unspecific about the mode of functioning of these flows, something we would argue that Lotman’s theories can clarify.

5 Tibi argues that Euro-Islam incorporates aspects of the European secular tradition and cultural modernity which ‘goes beyond the Islamic tolerance restricted to Abrahamic believers’ (Tibi 2002, 37).

6 The paper is based on research carried out as part of the 3-year AHRC funded project ‘European Television Representations of Islam as a Security Threat: A Comparative Analysis’ (PI: S. Hutchings, Co-Investigator: Chris Flood, Researchers: Galina Miazhevich and Henri Nickels).

7 Entman defines media framing as when selected aspects of a ‘perceived reality’ are made ‘more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described’ (Entman 1993: 52).

8 This narrative script was further embedded in the public consciousness through the making of the controversial 2-part Channel 4 drama serial, Britz, which told the story of a brother and sister from a Pakistani Muslim family, one of whom follows a path into the British Establishment, and the other becomes radicalised after a visit to Pakistan, and is transformed into a fanatical suicide bomber.

9 Citations from Russian and French reports are all given in their English translation, with details of the date of broadcast in parentheses.

10 Elsewhere, Russian television news chooses to emphasise the Islamic extremist dimension to global terror in a way that is impossible in a domestic environment now beset by concerns over a racist backlash against Islamic migrants. The sinister role attributed by Vremia to Chechen rebel, Ahmad Zakayev, in the Litvinenko scandal, and to Litvinenko’s own conversion to Islam, is one example. Even at the end of the London/Glasgow episodes, the Vremia onsite reporter ends her final report on the events with the dramatic assertion that Islamist websites feature one, simple message to those wondering about the role of Al Quaeda in future such acts: ‘Wait!’ (Channel 1, 7/7/07).

11 For a comparative analysis of the role of ‘liberal values’ (including free speech) in European television reporting of the cartoons scandal, see Flood, Nickels, Hutchings and Miazhevich (2008).

12 The two French examples indicate that the ‘sleeper cell’ trope serves both to differentiate (France dismantled its cells long ago) and to align (the level of infiltration is frightening). As
we shall see shortly, this apparent contradiction is explained by the dual direction of the intercultural flow.

13 The transplanting of genericised global texts to the heart of local discourses, without prior filtering through larger, intermediate zones, is treated in a different context in Hutchings and Rulyova (Forthcoming), where we examine the importing of globalised television genres by provincial channels without mediation via Russian national models. Here, the position of ‘local’ is occupied by Russian national television itself, and that of ‘intermediary model’ by a ‘Euro-terror’ zone.

14 Another example of the heightened emphasis placed on the other’s Islamophobia is to be found in a 2006 Vremia report on attitudes to the Islamic veil in Holland. For discussion of this, and other cases, see Hutchings et al (2008), pp. 60-61.