Global viewing in East London

Al-Ghabban, Ammar

Mitglied der

Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

gesis
Leibniz-Institut
für Sozialwissenschaften

Global viewing in East London

Multi-ethnic youth responses to television news

Ammar Al-Ghabban

The Open University

ABSTRACT   This article engages with the understandings, responses and news viewing frameworks of young multi-ethnic, working-class Londoners following the war in Iraq and the so-called 'War on Terror'. Is television news itself viewed as a monolithic entity, either in its own right or as the mouthpiece of whichever regime is in power? Are some viewers more prone to accept the invitations of certain television news discourses than others, while some remain aloof, sceptical and critical? Based on a sustained qualitative analysis of audience research in East London, this article problematizes the often taken-for-granted answers to these questions. It urges a rethinking of simplistic assumptions about the connections between discourses on the TV screen and in the living room. It finds unusual gaps and connections between discourses used by politicians at given points in time and those that affect communities in their material and psychic life in particular places.

KEYWORDS   apocalyptic, audience, criticism, fatalism, fears, media discourses, security, television news, youth

Introduction

To discuss television news and its audiences in the contemporary global arena conjures up a series of questions about politics and viewing, and about ways of analysing talk or drawing conclusions from it about politics, news and viewing. There are now more news channels than ever before, in many languages, with many broadcasting around the clock. Their access to capital, resources, broadcasting power and control varies almost as much as that of the people who view them. The participants interviewed in London 'watched' the aftermath of the bombing of Baghdad in Bengali, English and Arabic. They watched it in the morning, afternoon and late at night, with others in their families, alone in their bedrooms, on the internet or even as text images on their mobile phones. Is this plethora of news sources a signal of a brave new world that gives

ARTICLE

all viewers what they want, when they want it, a feast of news for the lay viewer, allowing for critical comparison? Is it to be celebrated as the actualization of a modernist media dream in which no political event goes uncovered or unwatched and all can be tracked from outset to conclusion by a truly informed public? Or is it the same old imperialist domination – western government rhetoric, dressed in national languages, spoken by well-groomed, plausible, international presenters? Worse still, is it received by a generally apathetic, overly-respectful, ill-informed audience ripe for manipulation and mobilization by exclusive discourses on ethnicity, nation, religion and violence?

From social contexts to interpretive patterns and back

What do theories of discourse have to contribute to the analysis of responses to media proliferation? In *Discourse and Social Change* (1994), Norman Fairclough analyses newspaper articles and advertisements, arriving at strong conclusions about patterns of implicitly and explicitly political discourse: 'interpreters are compliant, in the sense of fitting in with the positions set up for them in texts' (1994: 136). However, he acknowledges that hypotheses about readers based on textual analysis alone may be completely misleading, because

> not all interpreters are compliant: some are to a greater or lesser extent, and more or less explicitly, resistant. Interpreters are, of course, more than discourse subjects in particular discourse processes; they are also social subjects with particular accumulated social experiences and with resources variously oriented to the multiple dimensions of social life and these variables affect the ways they go about interpreting particular texts. (1994: 136)

Despite their nuances, these conclusions about readers' (interpreters') subjectivity still leave media viewers in a strangely tight corner. Either they take up a position against the text that they view, or they 'consume' the textual discourses whole and incorporate them. A certain social subjectivity enables certain readers to 'resist', and resistance – or refusal of the authority of a sanctioned news text – seems to be an end in itself. In relation to the young participants who watch the news, what appears more likely is that all readers orient themselves differently depending on their experiences and varying community, class, ethnicity and gender identities. Based on these, they come to a range of complex positions with regard to what they watch. These discursive positions are then inflected further, depending on the various contexts of discussion (interviews, family viewing) or social practices at stake. As we will see, young viewers can be sceptical of news proclamations about 'terrorist threats' and also convinced about the instability of the world. They generally articulate these positions inconsistently,

and (depending on their rhetoric) may even be overtly contradictory or self-contradictory, but this does not detract from the fact that their positions are strongly felt, even passionately believed.

In *Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India* (2001), Arvind Rajagopal closes the triangle or loop between television texts, the social context and the interpretations of audiences, with reference to the materiality of existence in a capitalist society. Pointing to the material and discursive repercussions of strongly-held personal beliefs on social and political life, and the dangers of linear and unitary effects models, he writes:

> Television profoundly changes the context of politics. But to thereafter treat it as centre and source point of influence is misleading … There is an institutional break between production and reception, and between the dispersed regions of message interpretation and the indirect modes of its use. Accordingly, no law-like patterns of influence are likely to be discerned. Different effects may ensue at different locations, harnessed together discreetly if not altogether invisibly as they rise and fall with the cadences of media narratives, journalistic routines, public relations promotions and marketing campaigns … Electronic capitalism foregrounds, in unprecedented fashion, the plurality of world-views that co-exist, even while rapidly creating circuits of communications across them. This then changes the constraints within which politics takes place. (2001: 24)

Much research into news viewing has yet to take on board these cautions against one-way effects models. But even imperfectly-conceived studies can offer insight into the connections between social practices of political participation and news viewing. In Brazil, Mauro Porto set up an 'experiment' to 'investigate the effects of television on citizens' interpretation of the political process' (2000: 1): the links between media consumption and viewers' democratic consciousness and participation. Porto appears to assume that mediated versions of reality significantly shape democracy, but also that viewers' interpretations of these mediated versions are relevant. He argues that

> the traditional view of the media's role in a democracy as being to portray the facts in a neutral way or 'reflect' accurately political and social reality … is insufficient for the study and consolidation of democracy. (2000: 3).

Asking about the kinds of interpretive frames available to citizens watching news about the political process in Brazil, Porto proposes a shift from the traditional democratic ideal of an 'informed citizenry' towards a new model: an 'interpreting citizenry'. He concretizes this proposal in an experiment in which a number of randomly-selected viewers near Brazilia are shown differently inflected 'open' and 'closed' versions of the same political news story. The study's unsurprising conclusion is that a greater plurality of news stories, with a variety of frames and positions, enhances

democratic participation even for the most disenfranchised members of the public. For the present study of young people and news consumption, the most relevant finding is that many participants did not adopt the 'interpretive framework' presented by the news story that they watched, and did not recall much information from the story, yet they did have strong opinions about the story's main point or frame of reference (2000: 15). Recent content-analytical research into the 'repertoire of communicative frames' utilized by television news (Cottle and Rai, 2006) also endorses notions of increasing news complexity as offering 'differing possibilities for the public elaboration and engagement of contending interests, issues and identities' (2006: 185), concluding that modern news, rather than being merely about conveying the perspective of the ruling élite, is 'implicated in both structures of dominance and processes of deliberative democracy' (2006: 185). Although this is no stunning insight, it is still worth emphasizing.

What then do these accounts of 'interpretive frames' and 'discursive fields' actually imply about watching the news? To move from the notion that television news helps to configure politics in supposedly democratic social settings to the notion of audiences as citizens might seem to take for granted the transformative potential of all viewing activity. Many researchers remain interested in the questions that Roger Silverstone raises in *Television and Everyday Life* (1994):

> Does that viewing activity make a difference? Does it offer the viewer an opportunity for creative or critical engagement with the messages on the screen? … How is it constrained by the social environment in which it takes place as well as by the potential or lack of potential available in the text? (1994: 154)

The testimonies of the young people analysed here confirm that some news programmes invite a greater range of viewer engagements – practical and rhetorical – than others, that some viewers respond to news discourses with greater passion than others, and that knowledge about viewers' social backgrounds enables better understanding of their positions of power and control in relation to current political processes off-screen. This leads us away from notional types of 'active' or 'passive', 'resistant' or 'accepting' news viewers (as in David Morley's 'dominant', 'negotiated' or 'oppositional' viewers in his *'Nationwide' Audience* study of 1980). We need to look instead for the socially-situated connections and patterns between viewers' lived experiences and the ways in which they interpret mediated events (cf. Ahmad, 2006; Aksoy and Robbins, 2000; Banaji and Al-Ghabban, 2006). This can help to explain the appeal of some news programmes dealing with world political events, the loathing (or challenge) associated with others, and the ways in which off-screen affiliations are implicated in interpretations and uses of on-screen news 'events'.

Method

Having taught at the same secondary school in Tower Hamlets in the East End of London for more than a decade, I have built up knowledge of the lives, experiences and practices of the local community. Having taught English and Media to sometimes three siblings from the same family over 12 years, met parents or carers repeatedly, and kept in touch with ex-students who have left and then returned, I have both personal and sociological knowledge of the contexts of young people's lives.

This article concentrates mainly on one focus group and three pair interviews with 14- to 16-year-old school students, most identifying themselves as British Bengali Muslims. The focus group consisted of two boys (Shahed and Badrul) and two girls (Shabana and Rumena). The pairs, all girls, were Habiba and Rumena, Sonya and Ruhella, and Angela and Abby. The latter identified themselves as non-religious and white English. All names are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants, but have been chosen to reflect ethnicity. These discussions all took place in the school building out of lesson time. The students volunteered to discuss their news viewing for this study. All were aware of my role as researcher on the 'Shifting Securities' project, although their primary perception was as a longstanding teacher. My presence during discussions will have affected the kinds of statements they made, in ways which are difficult to ascertain. However, I felt that the trust I had earned as a teacher carried over into the interview context, and allowed for frank revelations which might not otherwise have been forthcoming.

Roger Silverstone warns that 'homogenously gendered or class-based interview groups may … over-determine results' (1994: 148). With this in mind, a group consisting of four young non-Muslim women in their late twenties was interviewed also. Their social affiliations are primarily working class, but also inflected by experiences of work, parenting and socializing outside the ghettoized contexts within which most of the younger participants reside. They are: Aisha (English mother, Egyptian father), Gemma (African Caribbean parents), Jody (English parents) and Kia (English mother, Ghanaian father).

Ellen Seiter cautions against 'influencing, inhibiting and changing' (1999: 9) the way in which participants speak, while Altheide and Johnson (1998) foreground 'tacit knowledge' as being not only crucial to the interpretation of qualitative data but also the key to its dismissal and disavowal by positivistic readers. Therefore, these young people were asked a wide range of initially open and then increasingly more specific questions, seeking clarification. The questions centred on their news consumption habits, the media coverage of the war in Iraq (and its aftermath), the 'War on Terror', and other major contemporary news events such as the Asian tsunami. Given that the interviews took place between September 2004 and December 2005, much of the discussion

centred around issues of 'security' in three senses of the term: young people's perceptions of global security; the extent to which people feel secure in their local communities; and the way in which the issue of security tends to dominate media debates in Britain today.

Discussion

Terrorism news talk

The participants repeatedly identified two key themes as dominating coverage of major events by television news in the UK over recent years. The first is the British Government's effort to promote the notion of a 'terrorist threat' via the media, so as to ensure that it remains a central issue in both domestic and global politics. The second, equally important, is the British media's tendency to 'demonize' Muslims and present the Islamic faith as being predicated on violence and *jihad*. Of particular interest here are the ways in which these two media discourses, as identified by the young participants, interacted with the worldviews and social perspectives that are dominant in the families, friendship networks and communities to which they belong.

For Angela and Abby, white English girls from lower-middle and middle-class families respectively, the ubiquity of these media discourses was unsurprising: it fitted neatly with their cynical view of institutions such as 'the government' and 'the media'. Angela compared the British media's obsession with the so-called 'terrorist threat' to their preoccupation with global warming. This, she said, 'was just something that's been made up by some American scientist'. Unknowingly echoing some of David Altheide's sentiments in *Creating Fear: News and the Construction of Crisis* (2002), Abby related specific themes from George Orwell's *1984* (1949) to the manner in which the British Government, via the media, endeavours to keep the general public in a permanent state of fear with regard to the prospect of an extremist Muslim terrorist attack. In Angela's words: 'When everyone's afraid it means the government have loads of power.' Both girls viewed the British media's tendency to misrepresent Islam as 'unfair', in particular the notion of *jihad*, and the focus on 'extremist' Muslims instead of the overwhelming majority of 'ordinary' Muslims. For both, the likelihood of a terrorist attack on this country was low and the media's presentation of the threat was exaggerated. Asked how she felt about such threats, Abby replied: 'I'm not particularly afraid of terrorism or anything.'

The media discourses connecting terrorism and Muslims did not surprise the British-Bangladeshi youth in the sample either. Many expressed the view that the British media were not to be trusted to report events involving Muslims in a fair and balanced way. Time after time in interviews and focus group discussions, the Bengali participants referred almost wearily to what they saw as the 'biased' nature of British television news

programmes and channels (also see Banaji and Al-Ghabban, 2006). Asked for examples, most spoke of the perceived lack of reporting of Iraqi casualties throughout the conflict in Iraq. Habiba for example, said:

> They only name the American and British troops that were killed and there were hundreds more Muslims killed; yet it's not relevant; it's not important to them.

Scepticism towards British or western media led many to search for and use alternative news sources. In addition to watching BBC, Sky and ITV, several Bengali speakers said that they relied on Bangla TV and VectOne Bangla for alternative perspectives. Some also watched Al-Jazeera (Arabic) and Abu Dhabi TV, despite not speaking Arabic, simply to experience the images. This further emphasizes the disillusionment felt by many regarding aspects of British news reporting, and suggests that verbal news reports fail to frame images for viewers who are unconvinced by US and British government policies. Instances of western television news coverage of Iraqi casualties were dismissed as rare by the participants, and as cynical attempts by media organizations to appear neutral and balanced. As Habiba put it, they do it 'just to show that they're not biased and that they show both sides'.

In his seminal study of young people, political socialization and television news, David Buckingham (2000) makes an interesting distinction between the attitudes of young people towards the media and television news: 'cynicism' and 'criticism'. This distinction appears apposite to this study. 'Cynicism' is 'more generalized and more distanced', while 'criticism' is 'often motivated by an emotional investment in the topics that are dealt with', Buckingham argues (2000: 216). The responses of some of the young British Bangladeshi participants reflected a high degree of emotional involvement. Buckingham also notes that 'criticism implies a belief in the antecedent reality that the text purports to represent and a commitment to the idea that the truth about it can and should be told' (2000: 216). Seeking out and using alternative news sources, sometimes in different languages and media, implies such a commitment. Indeed, the recent proliferation of satellite news channels from around the world suggested to some of the young people that 'the truth' (or more and less plausible versions of it) 'can' be told. This, in turn, has cued a further interest in the events being depicted, further thought about the contexts of these events and, for some, the desire to participate or intervene by supporting certain versions of events and dismissing others in wider public contexts. Here, the signing of petitions and participation in public demonstrations are the most overt examples: some of the participants explained that after following the build-up to the war in Iraq in 2003 on various channels and websites, they attended anti-war demonstrations. When the bombing of Baghdad began, some even left school in the middle of a working day (without their parents' knowledge) to march in protest from East London to Parliament Square.

The changing transnational media environment is mainly available to those with access to non-terrestrial satellite or digital television and/or the internet, and is of special value to those who operate in more than one language. It may enable some such people to discuss or participate in political life as they would never have done before. Even a study as small and local as this one shows that issues such as security, or the changing world of news production and consumption, can have very different implications for even slightly different groups of people. Some of the young Bengalis interviewed – specifically, those with access to non-terrestrial satellite or digital cable television and/or the internet – can now access a wider range of news sources and experience divergent representations of global events. This has arguably enabled them to engage thoughtfully with political life to a greater extent than would otherwise have been the case. But for white British youth such as Angela and Abby, the impact of a more news-saturated media environment is less clear. Neither had access to non-terrestrial television, and although both had access to the internet, neither could cite any alternative news sources. Perhaps the key difference between these two sets of people is not to do with access but with the motivation to seek alternative perspectives. Angela and Abby by no means accepted terrestrial news programmes as being 'accurate' and 'fair' representations of events. They seemed comfortable with their own perspectives and dissatisfied with UK media. They did not pursue alternative sources because they felt no need to do so. It would be interesting to study those young viewers (and other viewers) who watch no news at all during a period of great news proliferation.

For at least half of the participants, though, being able to speak another language such as Bengali, and having access to satellite television, helped them to understand global events from different perspectives and to form opinions about how media organizations chose to portray them. However, everyone in the sample was sceptical about the motivations and actions of UK and western news media. Abby and Angela were as critical of the nebulous media linkage between 'terror' and 'Islam' as their Bengali peers. They regarded 'imminent terrorist attack' as rhetoric or pure invention. But curiously, while some of the working-class British Bangladeshis were just as cynical about the British media, they did not dismiss the 'terror threat' in the same way. In fact, some of them believed that a terrorist attack was indeed likely and imminent.

Apocalyptic visions

Why this reluctance to dismiss the 'terror threat'? For some, their distrust of the British Government and media was matched by their belief in the resolve of figures such as Osama bin Laden to carry out their threats:

> Sonya: I think it's just the same because you don't know when terrorists are
> gonna attack you … You know, with Canary Wharf, have you watched that
> news? Someone's giving notes.

Interviewer: About what?

Sonya: About thinging Canary Wharf … so basically it could happen anytime – you don't know.

Ruhella: I've got a feeling that bin Laden might bomb this place …

Interviewer: So you don't feel the world is a safer place?

Sonya: I don't, 'cause if someone has done something wrong to a terrorist, they're gonna come back.

Asked how safe they now felt with regard to a terrorist attack in this country, a typical response of young Bengalis was Sonya's: 'It could happen anytime – you don't know.' She clarifies this in terms of the notion of vengeance, implying a Hollywood or Bollywood gangster scenario. However, further discussions suggested that other discourses were in play among this group of students. The state that the world is in today was explained by the idea that there are greater forces at work, be they the US Government, 'terrorists', fate or Allah. For example, the following exchange took place over the Asian tsunami:

Habiba: It's a wake-up call for the world, innit?

Interviewer: What do you mean?

Rumena: Like the end of the world is coming.

Habiba: Like you don't have much time, do you? The wave just showed people that you might just die *next day*.

Interviewer: So how does that make you feel about life then, when you say it like that?

Habiba: It's coming to an end.

Rumena: There's signs in different ways that I can see it. There's signs. Signs in religious terms and signs in the world terms.

Habiba: The war in Iraq, it's just like the Third World War, innit?

Interviewer: So you're saying the war in Iraq is 'a sign'?

Rumena: A lot of people are dying in the world for no reason.

Habiba: Because the world's more advanced, all the things are more …

Rumena: It was probably safer 20 years ago, than it is now.

Habiba: All the ammunition they have now and …

Rumena: Crime.

Habiba: If you think about the East End, say for example, where we live, you know. Crime's just increasing so fast.

Interviewer: What else makes you think that the world's a scarier place?

Habiba: The war in Iraq.

Interviewer: And what else?

Rumena: The tsunami…

Habiba: Yeah.

An apocalyptic vision is presented as Rumena and Habiba connect the tsunami, the war in Iraq, crime in the East End and the state of the world in general. Natural disaster and human conflict are merged, and issues of 'global' and 'local' security are revealed as symptoms of the worrying course upon which the world is set. Thus a worldview is forged with the capacity to incorporate disparate events and phenomena in a cohesive way. Throughout this exchange there is a clear sense that forces out of our own control shape our lives. Such a belief in 'greater forces at work' renders us, as ordinary people, powerless. Other versions of powerlessness might suggest a measure of benign power protecting or channelling our lives. This one creates a sense of impending doom, leading to the conclusion that we must be ready for death.

Powerlessness in the face of devastating human suffering and the disturbing trajectory of contemporary society is sometimes dealt with by reference to quasi-religious perspectives. Here, Shahed and Shabana discuss preparedness to die:

Badrul: Some of the time you are hearing something and you get this feeling something is going to go wrong … Once we heard the BNP [British National Party] wanted to kill a Muslim or something like that, so we got a bit shocked and all that.

Shahed: But then again, Muslims, I think, are ready to die … anytime.

Shabana: Muslims aren't scared of dying.

Shahed: We know that we have to die one day … We know we're all gonna go to Allah on the day of judgement. We're gonna be judged by what we're doing in this world … We're scared, but we're ready to die.

Fatalism of this kind should not simply be seen negatively: what is 'depressing' and 'disempowering' to some might be of comfort to others. The fatalistic outlook is a psychological fact, not mere cultural relativism. As with the 'cynicism' that Buckingham describes, it may 'serve as a valuable – and indeed pleasurable – way of rationalizing one's own sense of powerlessness, and even of claiming a degree of superiority and control' (2000: 203). However, in order to understand the motivations and implications of such utterances properly, it is important to avoid simplistic conceptions of 'discourse' which suggest that language used in interviews directly 'represents' people's views and beliefs. As Buckingham argues: 'Discourse should not be seen as straightforward evidence of what individuals think or know, but as a form of social action' (2000: 202). Thus when one tries to understand Shahed and Shabana's exchange, one must bear in mind that utterances around the theme of being 'prepared to die' cannot be taken at face value. This is not to argue, either, that these young people do not 'believe' what they are saying. We must be aware, however, of the

possibility that such sentiments might be a product of the interview context (in this instance, a focus group of young Bengali Muslims in the UK) and thus be expressed as a means to creating or solidifying a collective identity. In the case of the quoted exchange, Shahed and Shabana respond to each other's claims about Muslims – what they believe and what they are prepared to do – in a way that as they speak, not only serves to reinforce a particular aspect of their faith, but also binds them together as young Muslims who have the same viewpoint and are in a shared endeavour.

Whatever the motivations and dynamics at play in these exchanges, one can see how such a view of the world and life – a belief that 'there are signs', that the 'end of the world' is approaching, and a concomitant preparedness to die – sits very comfortably with media discourses about 'the next terrorist threat'. In fact, to account for such a worldview, we should take into account three factors. First, the lived social realities for a majority of the Bengali community in the East End of London include severe poverty, unemployment, low wages, dangerous working conditions, overcrowded and unsanitary housing, gang fights, drug addiction, racial harassment, police harassment, familial pressures and general lack of opportunities. Second, the media environment of saturation news (24-hour channels, various language channels) and Hollywood apocalyptism (as seen in films such as *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and *The Core* (2003)), results in a constantly repeated flow of audiovisual death and destruction. Third, religious-political language is used by figures such Bush, Blair and bin Laden. These factors lock into, or are forcibly articulated with, one another. It would be wrong to explain young people's utterances in terms of any one single reason, be it media influence, poverty or religion, and least of all their age. Only by looking at the entire range of conditions and experiences can we go some way towards explaining how and why deeply sceptical consumers of television news, who are highly aware and critical of the media's preoccupation with the 'next terrorist threat', can at the same time accept key aspects of the same media discourse.

It is suggested here that western news discourses of 'imminent threat' interact in certain ways with the worldviews and stated beliefs of some of the young participants in this study. This should not be generalized to the communities within which these young people live. Some of the people interviewed from these same communities made no such claims. What is clear, however, is that people's positions in relation to so-called 'dominant discourses' cannot be mapped simply onto a spectrum from 'passively accepting' to 'resistant' or 'oppositional'. This masks underlying complexities and categorically misrepresents the relationships between audiences (specified in terms of religion, community, class, media context and experience, and so on) and the news that they consume.

Securing peace of mind: dismissing media fears?

One can be deeply sceptical about fears which one believes to be generated by the media and/or government, and yet at the same time countenance them

and even embroider them. The young women in their late twenties who were interviewed about the 'terror threat' argued that fears about a future terrorist attack were being used by the government, via the media, to support the war in Iraq; nevertheless, they did not dismiss the threat totally. Discussing the build-up to the war in Iraq, and the government's stated reasons for going to war, these young women spoke about how they felt the government was (in Jody's words) 'hyping up' the terrorist threat. Aisha, her friend, later explained more fully:

> Interviewer: When you talk about fear, where does it come from, who generates it?
>
> Gemma: The media, it has to be.
>
> Kia: Well, the government, they decide what we do need to see and what we don't need to see.
>
> Gemma: Tony Blair swore blind that Saddam has got these weapons that he can just push a button and within two minutes – that's what people were frightened of.
>
> Kia: It's *our* government that put about those lies.
>
> Interviewer: You know when you say 'the media' and 'the government', what, for you, would be the difference?
>
> Aisha: They both run each other, so it's hard to differentiate.
>
> Jody: But the media sort of switched halfway through, saying they don't have these weapons of mass destruction; they became more open-minded.
>
> Aisha: Also, there was the scare because I travel on the Piccadilly Line quite often, and there was this scare that Al-Qaeda might try to bomb it as it's the Heathrow line, so you *have to* think, 'Let's fight them.'

These participants were conscious of the way in which a threat was being used, and also quick to contextualize it in terms of similar experiences. Aisha recalled the 'IRA terror threats' and Gemma referred to similar concerns in Spain, where 'there's always some bomb that goes off'. For these women, in one sense there was nothing qualitatively different about the alleged threats facing Britons at home in the wake of September 11 and the US–UK war on Iraq. However, despite the stated awareness of government and media manipulation and the contextualization of the threat, not all of them were unconcerned, or confident that no such attack would happen. Aisha admits, somewhat embarrassed: 'I have to be honest and say I did feel frightened.' Gemma: 'Sometimes there's a little thought that might creep into your head, what if someone just put something on the track or something.' Indeed, only days after this interview, on 7 July 2005, such anxieties were reinforced.

Some of the young Bengalis interviewed, as mentioned earlier, accepted the terror threat but 'dealt with it' it in terms of general feelings of powerlessness (not uncommon in young people and certainly not among such

disenfranchised and disadvantaged people) and fatalism. In contrast, the four women interviewed were self-conscious and articulate about the importance of not allowing such anxieties and threats to affect the way that they lived:

You've got to live your life. (Gemma)
It's not something you spend your whole life thinking about. (Jody)
You can't think too much about these things. (Kia)

Kia's words became a recurring theme in the interview. These women deal with a sense of not being in control by not allowing it to become overwhelming at a mundane level. The contrasting ways of living with insecurity are based in the two groups' different life circumstances. The young women's posture vis-à-vis media discourses of threat is defensive and psychologically reflexive. Their main concern is the detrimental impact that increased fears might have on their quality of life – restricting their movement across the city or curtailing their social and work life.

Similarly, changes in the news media environment, as discussed earlier, may have benefited some of the young Bengalis interviewed, and had unclear implications for the white teenage girls. However, for the women in their twenties, the multiplicity of new channels and internet sites was to be viewed with caution and perhaps somehow resisted, not simply approved or embraced. The fact of being a parent clearly played a role here. Discussing 'media fears', Aisha raised the issue of 'paedophiles', explaining: 'Your child can be at home and be a victim of a paedophile, and that's from home.' This illustrates what one implication of new media technology has meant for her, and indeed many parents. New media technologies can mean that it has become even harder for these women to prevent 'things getting to' them.

Broader horizons? Using new news

Many young people in the East End of London, dissatisfied with mainstream British media coverage of the war in Iraq, turned to alternative news sources. In addition to consuming television news from other countries, some of the participants stated that they now depended on the internet to find out about, and experience, aspects of the Iraq conflict that they insisted were not being broadcast by any television news media. The most striking example of this type of news consumption that I encountered was shortly after the end of 'major combat operations' had been declared. It became apparent that students as young as 12 had seen video footage of decapitations in Iraq (notably that of Ken Bigley) via the internet, and many had personally downloaded these executions to their mobile phones, which they carried around with them throughout the school day:

Interviewer: Are there any images or pictures in your head that stand out?

Rumena: That head chopping one.

Interviewer: The head chopping one?

Rumena: They took hostages and they camcorded them cutting their heads off.

Interviewer: Do you remember seeing that on the news?

Rumena: Yeah … no, I got it on my phone.

Habiba: You can get it on the internet.

Rumena: They broadcast it on the internet and people can download it to their phone. …

Interviewer: How did you feel when you were watching it?

Rumena: I wanted to watch it again and again, not in a good way but in a bad way, 'cause I wanted to see how it was like …

Habiba: What they the kidnappers were doing was just as wrong as the war.

Those looking in at the community from the outside might see the very act of downloading such material as an endorsement of the hostage-takers' actions. Yet such graphic and (in their words) 'deeply disturbing' images cemented most participants' views that the conflict in Iraq should not have happened. Both Habiba and Rumena said that they found the events 'disgusting' and 'sick', and Habiba equated the beheading morally with the war itself. Even when the participants felt compelled to use alternative news sources, their reactions to specific events were not necessarily at odds with those of the mainstream, liberal, western or UK news media. Sonya's words – 'You don't know when terrorists are gonna attack you … basically it could happen anytime – you just don't know' – are implicitly an emotional acknowledgement of media commentaries on images such as those of September 11, the Ken Bigley execution and a host of other concerns in her social context. Other participants said similar things.

Conclusion

What does this research tell us about young viewers' responses to the overt invitations or strongest 'frames' of news dealing with global security? As Rajagopal (2001) suggests, news viewing and political opinion formation are messy processes. Both in terms of conceptualizing 'news consumers' and teaching about the news, we need to recognize that it is not enough to be informed about, and critical of, media discourses on issues such as security. We also need to understand the social, emotional and political *milieux* motivating both news and individual or group responses to it. The politics that surrounds viewers in their everyday lives is always charged with emotion, and this informs all news discussions.

In this study, two groups of self-declared sceptical viewers – some middle-class white or mixed-ethnicity girls and women, and some working-class Bengali girls and boys – engaged with the mediated notion of a terrorist threat. Taking the threat seriously meant different things for

them. For some working-class Bengali youth it meant retreating into the apparent comfort of rhetoric about 'powerlessness'. For an older group it meant consciously trying to prevent such fears from disrupting life and becoming overwhelming. Thus it is essential to think about the complexities of news audiences' understandings. Critique and resistance are not synonymous; neither are enjoyment and acceptance. Ironically, it was only by dismissing (or simplistically 'resisting') western news *en masse* as unreliable and misleading that some viewers managed to sidestep engagement with the issue of threat.

Returning to questions about the potential for democratic transformation in the new, plural news environment, it is suggested that there is room for cautious optimism. The plethora of channels does not give the highly disempowered and disenfranchised viewers in this study more access to 'neutral' news sources or the democratic arena. Yet there is no evidence that it is a bad thing for viewers from diverse backgrounds. Didactic, one-sided and propagandistic news appeared to provoke the young participants not only to cynicism (as found by Buckingham) but also to some of the most ardent critique and political debate, and occasionally to practical political intervention, by drawing up or signing petitions and going on demonstrations.

It would seem fruitful to study further, and with larger samples, what difference, if any, the widening of access to diverse news sources makes for multi-ethnic viewers of various ages. Looking beyond the remit of this data, if young viewers become able to hear things in their own languages, framed by different (national or regional) politics, to view images they want to view without racist commentary, or to hear their own communities debate the ethics of atrocities supposedly committed in their name, then this could be entirely positive. The findings here hint at a final point with still-wider implications. Regardless of specific channels' intrinsic biases and affiliations, the more of them young people watch, the more chance there is that they may think and talk about the representations of the world that they witness, and about the processes behind those representations. As a result, both the form of news and its content become intrinsically political issues. This is especially interesting as regards the people who tend to watch little or no news. Of course, information and debate guarantee neither political empowerment nor sustained action. But, in the long run, for those interested in youth audiences and participation, news which motivates those who do not usually watch or read news to do so might be as useful as news which claims to be 'neutral'.

References

Ahmad, F. (2006) 'British Muslim Perceptions and Opinions on News Coverage of September 11', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 32(6): 961–82.

Aksoy, A. and K. Robbins (2000) 'Thinking across Spaces: Transnational Television from Turkey', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 3(3): 345–67.

Altheide, D.L. (2002) *Creating Fear: News and the Construction of Crisis.* Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.

Altheide, D.L. and J.M. Johnson (1998) 'Criteria for Assessing Interpretive Validity in Qualitative Research', in N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (eds) *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*, pp. 283–312. London: Sage.

Banaji, S. and A. Al-Ghabban (2006) 'Neutrality Comes from Inside Us': Indian and British Asian Responses to Television News after September 11', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 32(6): 105–26.

Buckingham, D. (2000) *The Making of Citizens: Young People, Television News and the Limits of Politics.* London: Routledge.

Cottle, S. and M. Rai (2006) 'Between Display and Deliberation: Analyzing TV News as Communicative Architecture', *Media Culture and Society* 28(2): 163–89.

Fairclough, N. (1994) *Discourse and Social Change.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Morley, D. (1980) *The 'Nationwide' Audience: Structure and Decoding.* London: British Film Institute.

Orwell, G. (1949) *1984.* London: Secker and Warburg.

Porto, M.P. (2000) 'Making Sense of Politics: TV News and Audiences' Interpretations of Politics in Brazil', paper presented to the Latin American Studies Association, Miami, FL, 16–18 March.

Rajagopal, A. (2001) *Politics After Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Seiter, E. (1999) *Television and New Media Audiences.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Silverstone, R. (1994) *Television and Everyday Life.* London: Routledge.

Biographical note

Ammar Al-Ghabban has taught English and Media Studies to 11- to 16-year-olds in east London since 1994. He is currently also a researcher for the Open University on the ESRC-funded project 'Shifting Securities'. ADDRESS: St Paul's Way Community School, Shelmerdine Close, Poplar, London E3 4AN, UK. [email: versova@aol.com]