

# Becoming iconic

**John Tulloch** reflects on his experience engaging with the media as a victim of the 7/7 bombings.

**O**n July 7, 2005 I was sitting about three feet from a suicide bomber on the Edgware Road underground train in London when he exploded his bomb. Seven people in the carriage were killed, including the bomber, Mohammad Sidique Khan. Many were severely injured. I was one of them, but despite being directly exposed to the explosion, I was extraordinarily lucky: my legs, lungs and brain survived serious damage. I do have ongoing vertigo, significant post-traumatic stress disorder effects, and brain/ear/voice damage effects, so it will be appreciated that these long-term effects have made it difficult for me to engage critically with the media in relation to the use of my 7/7 image politically, particularly in the areas of criminal detention without charge and anti-Muslim campaigns.

As one of the 'walking wounded' to emerge from Edgware Road station about one hour after the explosion, I was photographed by free-lance photographers without being aware of it. Two of the photographs taken at Edgware Road - of victim Davinia Turell in a white surgical mask being helped by passer-by Paul Dadge, and of myself, face encrusted in blood, an impromptu padding bandage around my head, tied by someone's light-blue tie - went instantly around the world's media. They became, as the media liked to say, 'iconic', representing graphically Britain's first terrorist attack. Above ground, only the shockingly opened-up image of the red double-decker London No 30 bus could represent the horror of the four attacks that day. Three of them were underground, so only the walking wounded could convey any sense of what had happened down

there. Circumstantially, I was about to begin a new kind of engagement with the media.

Until July 7, 2005 I had a very different kind of ongoing media engagement. For 12 years I had been a professor of media and communication studies. For over 20 years, I had researched the media, with a particular focus on what I called 'ethnographies of production' of television and theatre drama. As a university teacher I had talked about the media's rhythm directly after a major medical or natural trauma, such as HIV/AIDS or the frequently raging bush fires in Australia.

So, though in the months and years after 7 July, 2005, there were many times when my physical condition weakened my ability to engage critically in interview with the media, I did have something of an insider's advantage to help me. While still in hospital, and unable to read more than a couple of lines of print at a time, I was able to recognize the rhythm of disaster reporting by scanning the photographs of 7/7: first the emphasis on the rescuers and visible victims then the one-by-one images emerging of the tragically missing and dead; then the laying of blame on the visually identified suicide bombers after about five days, and, later wider blame relating to issues of security and government. Though terrorism may seem very specific, implicit rules of media representation are followed, whether it is a matter of fires, HIV, genocide, tsunamis or terrorism, and I could see this happening. This was the 'objective' part of my media competence clicking into place, giving me something to hold on to in the many hours of pain, injection, medication, vomiting, and awful vertigo which

prevented me getting out of bed. My everyday life routines, confidences and competences had been completely blown away, and this was one sense of continuity with that past.

But there was now a new present tense: not only of trying to re-forge my personal identity experientially, but also having a new identity constructed for me by the media; and trying - when I was fit enough for some interviews - to help construct that identity. In this process I 'knew' certain things: that I had opposed the invasion of Iraq, had marched against it in Sydney with several hundred thousand people; that there was a widely shared view, across international political fronts, that the invasion of Iraq had significantly increased the likelihood of terrorist attacks; and that when the suicide tape of Mohammad Sidique Khan hit the media, I was not surprised by what he said. As an academic in the social and human sciences, I also 'knew' that all of us - including the 7/7 victims and perpetrators - have multiple identities and 'subjectivities'. Consequently, I resisted from the beginning being reduced to the one-dimensionality of 'brave survivor' or 'representative British victim'. And, as I began to talk with researchers among Muslim communities, I learned that Mohammad Sidique Khan was much more than a 'suicide bomber'. He had also been a committed school aid, tracing underprivileged school children's school records, and helping out in the local Beeston (Leeds) community in relation to teenage drugs and prostitution. He was then, and still is now, liked and respected in his local area for these other identities.

Regaining confidence is a major factor in recovering from long-term injury after a near-death experience; and in most areas of my media comment I didn't have the overall confidence to engage with my 'victim' role. For example, when interviewed about my medical or PTSD treatment, I gave only a '100% positive' account, and wouldn't criticize any of it. Most of the treatment was excellent, and I didn't have the energy or resilience to

engage with the rest. Frankly, I wanted to believe my own positives: I wanted my medical recovery to be linear and non-problematic. But in the media field itself, I had my own competence and knowledge: and that gave me the confidence to 'engage'. Necessarily, though, the stages were small, incremental, uncertain because of my far from linear health condition, and because the stakes (of talking about Islamist terrorism and victims) so high, so complex, so available for media misuse.

Still, the increments counted, and built up as increments can. First, there was a four minute interview on BBC's Radio 4 *Today* programme in August 2005, where I spoke of 'Iraq' itself as multiple identities: in terms of military rhetoric; oil, international economics and *real politik* (a long history of Iraq, which the then London Mayor Ken Livingstone had already talked about in the media); the 'Iraq' in the presidential style politics of a British prime minister; the Iraq of countless deaths, torture and shame – of Fallujah and Abu Ghraib; the 'Iraq' threatening British civil liberties. On *Today* I said, 'Iraq is not simply something that happened that generates terrorists. It's a whole set of rhetorical meanings that won't go away'. My words that day, skillfully-edited by the *Today* team, were heard by an editor at the publisher, Little, Brown who asked me to do a book, *One Day in July: Experiencing 7/7* to expand on those different 'Iraqs'.

Next, there was the 'Tell Tony He's Right' incident in November 2005 when the *Sun* newspaper used my bleeding face across the whole front page to support Blair's 90 days detention without charge Bill, without asking me whether I supported it. I didn't support it, seeing neither then nor now the logic or evidence for it, and being persuaded that other approaches could serve security better without undermining sensitive community relations. A freelance *Guardian* journalist (and noted media academic) Ros Coward had already interviewed me about my views of

the media and Iraq. As in the case of the *Today* interview which prompted it, I had almost cancelled this interview because of feeling unwell and drained of energy; and in any case, my publisher didn't give her permission to publish. But the *Sun's* intervention changed Little, Brown's mind, and two days after the *Sun* front page, there was a challenging cover-page in the *Guardian*, 'They stole my voice', pointing to the *Sun's* role in using (supposed) victim support to pressurize Labour back-benchers to vote for the Bill. The media generally in Britain and internationally then picked up this intra-media argument: BBC 2 *Newsnight* in particular encouraged me to talk about the images from 7/7 as a professional academic as well as an emoting 'victim', and as a long-term political opponent of the Iraq invasion as well. So some of my different identities began to emerge in the media, and so did Mohammad Sidique Khan's.

By the first anniversary of 7/7 my 'multiple identity' focus was getting more edited television time – for example in an ITV Wales news interview with me that went to air on July 6, 2006; and more especially in the next incremental step forward, when ITN News asked me to 'author' (which meant conceptual and editing control, as well as to-camera anchorage) two three-minute items that ran on July 5 and 6 2005, on all its national news broadcasts. As it turned out, July 6 was the day of release on British TV news of 7/7 suicide bomber Shazad Tanweer's suicide tape. So consequently my two news slots went out as a minor challenge to 'the face of terror' in the same news broadcasts: in the first slot I spoke with residents of Beeston about their experience of Mohammad Sidique Khan, in the second, I spoke with Muslim students in Leeds about their support for 'not what he did but what he said', and heard their challenge on civil liberties grounds to security and media fear-inducement that had left them silent when a close friend at their mosque was hunted down

internationally as the (wrongly) labeled 'master-mind' behind 7/7.

More recently, during the international Victims of Terrorism conference at the University of Tilburg in March 2008, *Een Vandaag*, a high-quality news outlet on Dutch national television interviewed me, and included in the interview footage not only my 'multiple identity of Khan' position, but also footage from the ITN News edit I had done one year before, where the Muslim students are speaking about the 'illegal war'. Although a number of conference participants were interviewed, the item which went to air gave its full 8 minutes to the interview with me, probably because I had been prepared to respond on camera to their professional 'current issue' cue: the imminent website film by conservative Dutch MP Geert Wilders setting verses from the Qur'an against images of terror attacks in New York, London and Madrid.

My use of the word 'incremental' to describe the build-up over nearly three years of media engagement suggests a natural progression; but, of course, it was far from that. Rather it was a combination of my own media knowledge (for instance, my recognition of journalistic values of practice which helped me 'cue' the final edits of the Radio 4 *Today*, BBC 2 *Newsnight*, ITN News 'authored' slots, and the *Een Vandaag* item) and the professionalism of a lot of media people. I seldom succeeded in getting all my critical points to air; and sometimes, as I elaborate in my book, it made more effective television that I didn't. But my simple message is this: there are many fine media professionals out there, and there is room for much more 'public intellectual' engagement in the media than we might think. For academics, I believe there is no more important activity in the face of the growth of the criminal justice state. ■

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