

An Age of Celebrity Terrorism?

Luke Howie

Department of Behavioural Studies
Monash University

Abstract

The term *celebrity terrorism* has received increased attention as a result of the terrorist attacks in Mumbai in November 2008. Whilst this term had been previously used, primarily in media discourses but also in the academy, it has received little critical attention. Indeed, this term has yet to be clearly defined or even clearly outlined. It is this deficiency that I seek to address in this paper. I want to map the contours of *celebrity terrorism*. In this paper I bring together these two seemingly unrelated terms – *celebrity* and *terrorism* – and demonstrate how contemporary terrorism has produced powerful and terrifying images that have resulted in larger audiences of witnesses. Acts of terrorism that create these images are remembered, whilst other acts of terrorism are forgotten.

I argue that sociology has an important role to play in understanding the meanings and consequences of terrorism and, as an early career academic, I hope to be able to contribute in this role. It is in this spirit that I write this paper in the hope of making progress towards what might be called a *critical sociology of terrorism*. I argue that such a sociology may be deployed as a tool for understanding the meanings and consequences of terrorism in a variety of social contexts and situations.

Introduction: The Fifth of November

*Remember, remember the 5th of November.
Gunpowder, treason, plot.
I can think of no reason why gunpowder, treason
Should ever be forgot.*

The short poem that prefaces this paper is one example of how terrorism is *remembered*. This poem commemorates the night in 1605 when would-be terrorist Guy Fawkes and his Papist conspirators attempted an attack against Protestant parliamentarians in Britain with a planned attack on the Houses of Parliament (Williams, 2004: 14). To this day ‘Bonfire Nights’ are held across the world to celebrate the 5th of November and the recent film *V for Vendetta* (2005) glorifies Guy Fawkes’ planned attack. The 5th of November perhaps should never be – and will never be – forgot.

How terrorism is ‘remembered’ by global audiences of witnesses is particularly significant to those who seek to understand the motivations, goals and targets of contemporary terrorists. Of course, the 5th of November is not the only date that commemorates an infamous terrorist or terrorist attack. I argue that symbolic date coordinates such as ‘9/11’ (the spectacular live telecast of the attacks on New York and Washington DC on September 11, 2001), ‘3/11’ (the March 11, 2004 Madrid rail network bombings) and ‘7/7’ (the July 7, 2005 bombings on the London public transport network) permeate everyday culture and ensure that the terrorism and terrorists from these dates are long remembered.

More recently in the aftermath of the November 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai, some have suggested that terrorism has much in common with *cultures of celebrity* (see Cornish, 2008; Colen, 2008). Paul Cornish, writing for BBC News, declared the Mumbai attacks to be emblematic of an ‘*age of celebrity terrorism*’ (my emphasis) (Cornish, 2008). With this paper I want to begin to map the contours of what is increasingly being described as *the age of celebrity terrorism* and explore the links between terrorism, remembering and celebrity culture.

First, I outline the new meanings that emerge when I bring together two seemingly unrelated terms; *celebrity* and *terrorism*. Second, I explore some of the possibilities for understanding the meanings of celebrity terrorism. I suggest that perhaps New York City and the Twin Towers should also be considered *celebrities* in a post-9/11 world. I then explore what it means when a celebrity becomes the target of terrorists. I conclude by sharing a brief account of research in progress. In this final section I share some examples of how the meanings of celebrity terrorism are depicted by witnesses of contemporary terrorism in what is sometimes called the ‘blogosphere’ (see Campbell & Kelly, 2009: 22). I argue that since the blogosphere plays a

significant role in the everydayness of celebrity culture, it should not be surprising that much of the debate surrounding the meaning of celebrity terrorism can also be found in blogs. I argue in this section that the celebritisation of terrorism is a natural and perhaps inevitable consequence of the intersections between contemporary terrorism and instantaneous and globalised internet and broadcast media.

Celebrity Terrorism

My arguments in this paper are based on the premise that some acts of terrorism are remembered better than others – some are captured by the news media’s cameras even as they are occurring, some are recreated in feature films and television programs, while some are allowed to disappear and be forgotten. So whilst acts of terrorism like ‘9/11’, the Bali bombings, ‘3/11’ and ‘7/7’ will perhaps never be forgotten, other attacks – such as those perpetrated by militant groups in occupied Iraq and Afghanistan – may be more quickly forgotten. I want to explain why this occurs by bringing together the seemingly unconnected concepts of *celebrity* and *terrorism*.

The image and idea of *celebrity* plays a significant role in contemporary society and culture (Turner, 2006; Cashmore, 2006; Miller, 2001; 2008). Graeme Turner (1999; 2004; 2006) has explored at length the meanings and consequences of celebrity. One of Turner’s most pressing concerns is the shift of celebrity to everyday, routine and banal realms. He describes this shift as ‘the demotic turn’ (Turner, 2006: 153; 2004). The demotic turn is ‘a means of referring to the increasing visibility of the ‘ordinary person’ as they turn themselves into media content through celebrity culture, reality TV, DIY websites, talk radio’ and it represents ‘celebrity’s colonization of the expectations of everyday life in contemporary western societies’ (Turner, 2006: 153).

Moreover, Turner (2006: 154) argues that the demotic turn might be elsewhere deployed to understand other fields of ‘relations between media and culture’.

It is at these points of ‘relations’ between media and culture that I locate this discussion of celebrity terrorism. As Cornish (2008) argues, terrorists seeking celebrity ‘indulge in terrorism simply because they can, while their audience concocts a rationale on their behalf’. The goals of the celebrity terrorist are notoriety, fame and the production of terrifying and powerful images that have meanings and consequences far beyond the ‘flashpoint’ of terrorist violence (Howie, 2009a: 5). For Cornish (2008), ‘the character of modern terrorism’ is powerfully shaped by this image producing power and its spectacular consequences. Terrorism often produces spectacular and violent images and, for this reason, I argue that it is remembered in particular ways.

In many respects, the desire to create powerful images has long been a crucial goal for terrorists. According to Jenkins (1987: 583) terrorists seek to have a lot of people watching, not just a lot of people dead. It has been suggested that the result of this is an audience of witnesses that perceive terrorism as posing a danger far greater than any damage that terrorists could realistically cause (Friedland & Merari, 1985: 592; Horgan, 2005: 3). For would-be terrorists, being *seen* is perhaps more important than achieving some sort of concession from a government or military authority. Colen (2008), writing in the conservative ‘zine *The Brussels Journal*, disparagingly describes this as ‘Paris Hilton Terrorism’ – it is a type of terrorism that privileges visibility over achievement or success. Or, more precisely, where *visibility is the achievement or success*. In Colen’s (2008) cynical analysis of the meaning of celebrity terrorism she argues that terrorists ‘crave ... what Paris Hilton and Madonna

crave for when they have sex in public. What they long for ... [is] an obsessive audience' that will turn everyday terrorists into media celebrities.

Nacos (2002: 89) frames terrorism as 'celebrity' when it receives 'saturation coverage' making 'the perpetrators of mass-mediated political violence excellent candidates for celebrity status'. Certainly, it seems uncontroversial to suggest that media reporting of terrorism may be a site for the construction of celebrity terrorism. This was, according to Nacos (1994; 2002), best exemplified by the media reporting in the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing and, in particular, the reporting leading up to the perpetrator's – Timothy McVeigh's – execution: 'saturation coverage of terrorist spectacles makes the perpetrators of mass-mediated political violence excellent candidates for celebrity status, just like O.J. Simpson or Princess Diana' (Nacos, 2002: 89). Nacos (2002: 93) argues that Osama bin Laden has similarly received celebrity treatment following 9/11. She notes that 'bin Laden didn't have to say or write anything to dominate the news' in the aftermath of 9/11. Undoubtedly, when the news media reports terrorism it can be difficult for viewers to look away. Nacos (2002: 88-94) argues that the media turned Timothy McVeigh into a celebrity, spectacularised his violence and provided for a larger audience of televisual witnesses.

A recent event in Australia's theatre in the so-called 'War on Terror' represents an illustrative case of an accused 'terrorist' becoming a celebrity. Dr Mohammed Haneef became an instance celebrity in 2007 when the Queensland-based, Indian-born doctor was detained for ill-defined terrorism offences. Dr Haneef was celebritised as a terrorist, but the difference between Haneef and other terror celebrities such as McVeigh and bin Laden is that Mohammed Haneef had no connection to terrorism, played no role in any act or planned act of terrorism, and was – by all accounts – not a

terrorist. When the media produces a terrorist as a celebrity however, innocence or guilt plays little role. Amongst the comical analysis in the media of terror threats and dangers that the detaining of Haneef sparked, 'facts' are difficult to find (Howie, 2009b). What we know is that on June 30, 2007 an amateurish attempted terrorist attack took place at Glasgow Airport. On July 2, 2007 a so-called link was determined between the attacks and Mohammed Haneef and he was subsequently arrested and detained without charge. There was a frenzied journalistic response. Button (2007: 1) writing in *The Age* described how British police were 'desperately trying to establish a common denominator' between the failed Glasgow attack and Haneef. Crawford and Hudson (2007: 1) writing in the *Herald Sun* reported that people were ringing hospital switchboards to ensure that family and friends were not being treated by terrorists. Greg Pemberton (2007: 14) writing in *The Australian* noted that policing authorities had 'not yet made a link' between Haneef and the attempted attacks in Glasgow but bizarrely concluded:

But the timing of events, the acknowledged British source of advice and the fact one of the men arrested, Mohammed Haneef, was a registrar at Gold Coast Hospital in Southport, so a doctor, who had trained in India before coming to Australia from Northern England, suggest a direct connection.

Did it suggest a direct connection? Hardly. Muslims can at least be grateful that such circumstantial evidence that would place perhaps hundreds of Australian doctors in a position of 'direct connection' with terrorism would not stand-up to legal scrutiny. Analysis such as this, book-ended with claims that 'We may have dodged a bullet', worked to celebritise Dr Mohammed Haneef as a terrorist. Despite later reports of possible police bungles in handling the case, secret plots to make the charges stick,

and Haneef's total exoneration of any wrongdoing, the celebrityisation of Dr Haneef as a terrorist had already occurred.

Are the Twin Towers and NYC Celebrities?

How far should an analysis of celebrity terrorism extend? Should it extend to places and objects? Certainly New York City and the Twin Towers were already among the most well known images of a Western city before 9/11, but it could still be argued that the 9/11 terrorist attacks made NYC and the Twin Towers among the most *seen* cities and locations in human history.

I argue that through 9/11, the Twin Towers and NYC have attained a renewed *celebrity* status. In a post-9/11 world, NYC and the Twin Towers share something in common with Paris Hilton, Brad Pitt and Britney Spears – people want to see them, people want to know about them, and when their images appear on television and in other media spaces it is difficult for witnesses to look away. It is in this context that I argue that the celebrity of post-9/11 NYC and the Twin Towers are uncredited stars of some situation comedies that were/are symbolically set in NYC. In post-9/11 episodes of *Friends* and *Sex and the City* the Twin Towers were purged from all the wide-angle shots of NYC that were used to join scenes and accompany the opening credits. More recently *How I Met Your Mother* has continued this trend of *forgetting* 9/11. The absence of the Twin Towers from pop cultural representations of New York is distracting. I originally viewed it as evidence of an American culture that was eager to forget. Yet Carter Bays, one of *How I Met Your Mother*'s creators, explained in an interview that the show and its narrative technique of story-telling the present from an imaginary future is designed to be a tribute to post-9/11 NYC:

It's just that, almost immediately after 9/11, it felt like there was this sense of nostalgia for a time that wasn't too long ago because all of a sudden the world was different. There was this sense of looking at these days right now as the future good old days because you never know what's going to happen. It felt nice to think, as scary as the world is now, about a version of ourselves telling this story 30 years from now ... It means the world didn't blow up (Bays in Callaghan, 2009).

How I Met Your Mother stands as a metaphor for a better post-9/11 today – a today that will be retold and reanimated at some later point as a wonderful time to be alive, fall in love, and recover from the tragedy and trauma that had accompanied the beginning of the 21st century.

The Celebrity as the Target of Terrorism

If we are entering an age of celebrity terrorism I argue that the next logical development may be terrorists targeting celebrities. This type of celebrity terrorism was witnessed recently when the Sri Lankan cricket team was targeted in early 2009 in the Pakistani city of Lahore. Six policemen who were escorting the Sri Lankan team bus and the bus driver were killed. Seven cricketers, including Kumar Sangakkara and Chaminda Vaas, sustained gunshot wounds (BBC News, 2009). It was reported that ten to twelve gunmen ambushed the Sri Lankan cricket team on its way to a Test match at Gaddafi Stadium. Soon after the attack commenced (a matter of minutes), images were being beamed across the globe. Global media audiences witnessed the Pakistani security forces surrounding the Sri Lankan team bus to reach survivors but they failed to capture any of the terrorists (BBC News, 2009). But viewing audiences were left in little doubt that sporting personalities are ideal targets for spectacular terrorism (see, for example, West, 2008: 343-344).

Recently, the American singer Heather Schmid – a performer who is particularly popular in China and Pakistan – has reportedly become a target of al-Qaeda because of her support for the Pakistani government and her friendship with President Musharraf (McKay, 2009). As she explains:

I started to get disturbing phone calls and Facebook requests, my Web site was being hacked in a very slow, clever way. Things like my family photos were being taken and my tour schedule was changed. My webmaster tracked it back to Pakistan ... my friend was shocked to find an extremist video on YouTube where myself, Condoleezza Rice and President Bush are the Americans in the video considered as ‘Anti-Islamist’ (Schmid in McKay, 2009).

Former Beatle Paul McCartney has similarly attracted the ire of pro-Palestinian groups by performing in Israel as part of the nation’s 60th anniversary celebrations. A Syrian Sheik, Omar Bakri Mohammed, has suggested that McCartney is ‘the enemy of every Muslim’ because his performance in Israel offered support to an anniversary that celebrates the ‘atrocities of the occupiers’ (*Haaretz*, 2008).

This represents an alarming – but also logical – shift in the tactics of terrorists. Perhaps terrorists are no longer satisfied with perpetrating spectacular *violence* when a more spectacular *target* will be a far more effective way of attracting attention, gaining celebrity status and spreading terror. Just as al-Qaeda terrorists know that 3000 dead Americans in New York City are worth far more than 3000 dead American soldiers in the Iraqi and Afghan deserts, the terrorist who targets celebrities knows that a dead celebrity will send a more powerful message than a dead non-celebrity. In this way celebrity terrorism will tell witnesses more about how terrorism is remembered than it will about the terrorists’ political grievances.

Conclusion: Remember Remember

I would like to conclude this paper by making a leap and in doing so suggest a way forward for understanding the links between celebrity and terrorism. *Celebrity terrorism* represents a different way of understanding the meanings and consequences of contemporary terrorism. Understanding terrorism in this way may assist those who experience terror and those who seek to prevent and respond to terror better understand why some terrorism is remembered more clearly than others. I have in this paper attempted to outline the contours of celebrity terrorism; a term that I suspect may be used with increased frequency to describe contemporary terrorism. As Cornish (2008) suggests of those who carried out the Mumbai attacks:

In a novel twist, the Mumbai terrorists might have embarked on propaganda of the deed without the propaganda in the confident expectation that the rationalization for the attack – the narrative – would be provided by politicians, the media and terrorism analysts.

This type of terrorism may incite ‘the world’s D-list malcontents’ to violently pursue their radical desires for notoriety and fame without needing to be articulate, wealthy or particularly educated (Cornish, 2008). In this way, the celebrity terrorists’ fame would be something akin to the fame experienced by reality television celebrities, especially if the frenzied response in the blogosphere is any indication. As ‘Irc0’ (2008) writes in a blog hosted by *digg.com*:

we've already come to a point where people would pretty much do anything to appear on a tv show (see reality shows). Even though the thought of "celebrity terrorism" to that scale hadn't crossed my mind until now, I still think it is highly possible that there would be people out there just craving for the attention ... it's pretty ***** up.

However, as the blogger 'domiciliphile' (2008) argues:

I think what was different in the Mumbai attacks is being misinterpreted by the author [Cornish], perhaps even propagating a problem of interpretation through a myopic Western lens. In fact, I think we have to be careful, because I believe "Celebrity terrorism" is just a failed attempt at sandwiching two separate and distinct, revenue-generating buzz words together, and ultimately, terrorists will only be as "celebrity" as we make them.

Whilst 'bloggers' should perhaps not always be deployed as scholarly evidence, I do intend for these voices from the blogosphere to be heard in this instance. I believe that these voices may represent a location where celebrity and terrorism can be better understood and researched. The domain of celebrity belongs as much to these bloggers as it does to anyone else. It should be of no surprise that their online contributions offer valuable insight into the meanings of celebrity terrorism.

Celebrity terrorism may indeed be a 'revenue-generating buzz word', but it is also a new and novel way of understanding the meanings and consequences of contemporary terrorism, its image producing power and how terrorism is remembered. The term suggests that as long as there are people willing to pay attention, watch and witness when terrorism occurs, terrorism, terrorists and their targets will receive a celebrity's share of attention.

References

- BBC News (2009) 'Gunmen Shoot Sri Lanka Cricketers', *BBC News*, March 3, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/ft/-/2/hi/south_asia/7920260.stm, retrieved on May 8, 2009.
- Button, J. (2007) 'They Swear to Save Lives', *The Age*, July 4: 1.
- Callaghan, D. (2009) 'Those Were the Days', *Writers Guild of America*, available from <http://www.wga.org/content/default.aspx?id=3118>, retrieved on April 22, 2009.
- Campbell, P. and Kelly, P. (2009) 'Explosions and Examinations': Growing Up Female in Post-Saddam Iraq', *Journal of Youth Studies* 12: 21-38.
- Cashmore, E. (2006) *Celebrity/Culture*. Abingdon: Routledge.

- Colen, A. (2008) 'Paris Hilton Terrorism', *The Brussels Journal*, available <http://www.brusselsjournal.com/node/3673>, retrieved on May 29, 2009.
- Cornish, P. (2008) 'The Age of 'Celebrity Terrorism'', *BBC News*, November 30, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/south_asia/7755684.stm, retrieved on July 23, 2009.
- Crawford, C. and Hudson, F. (2007) 'Aussie Swoop as Police Believe They Have Cracked a Ring of ... TERROR DOCTORS', *Herald Sun*, July 4: 1.
- 'domiciliphile' (2008) 'The Age of 'Celebrity Terrorism'', November 30, available at http://digg.com/world_news/The_age_of_celebrity_terrorism, retrieved on July 23, 2009.
- Friedland, N. and Merari, A. (1985) 'The Psychological Impact of Terrorism: A Double-Edged Sword', *Political Psychology* 6: 591-604.
- Haaretz* (2008) 'Muslim Leader Threatens to Kill Paul McCartney Over Israel Gig', *Haaretz.com*, available at <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1020917.html>, retrieved on June 8, 2009.
- Horgan, J. (2005) *The Psychology of Terrorism*. London: Routledge.
- Howie, L. (2009a) *Terrorism, the Worker and the City: Simulations and Security in a Time of Terror*. Surrey: Gower.
- Howie, L. (2009b) 'Australia's History of Terrorism: Institutionalized Discrimination and the Response of the Mob', pp. 251-76 in S. Brawley (ed), *Doomed To Repeat? Terrorism and the Lessons of History*. Washington D.C.: New Academia.
- 'Irco' (2008) 'The Age of 'Celebrity Terrorism'', December 1, available at http://digg.com/world_news/The_age_of_celebrity_terrorism, retrieved on July 23, 2009.
- Jenkins, B. (1987) 'The Future Course of International Terrorism', pp. 581-589 in P. Wilkinson and A. Stewart (eds), *Contemporary Research on Terrorism*. Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press.
- McKay, H. (2009) 'Is Singer Heather Schmid Being Targeted by Terrorists?', *Fox News*, March 18, available at <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,509649,00.html>, retrieved on July 27, 2009.
- Miller, T. (2002) *Sportsex*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Miller, T. (2008) *Makeover Nation: The United States of Reinvention*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press.
- Nacos, B. (1994) *Terrorism & the Media: From the Iran Hostage Crisis to the Oklahoma City Bombing*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Nacos, B. (2002) *Mass-Mediated Terrorism: The Central Role of the Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.
- Pemberton, G. (2007) 'Bombs Aimed at Heart of Democracy', *The Australian*, July 4: 14.
- Turner, G. (1999) 'Tabloidisation, Journalism and the Possibility of Critique', *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2: 59-76.
- Turner, G. (2004) *Understanding Celebrity*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Turner, G. (2006) 'The Mass Production of Celebrity: 'Celetoids', Reality TV and the 'Demotic Turn'', *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 9: 153-165.
- West, B. (2008) 'Collective Memory and Crisis: The 2002 Bali Bombings, National Heroic Archetypes and the Counter-narrative of Cosmopolitan Nationalism', *Journal of Sociology* 44: 337-353.
- Williams, C. (2004) *Terrorism Explained: The Facts About Terrorism and Terrorist Groups*. Sydney: New Holland.