

# Security and Difference in the Mediapolis: Towards a Comparative Analysis of City Sensoria

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This presentation examines how issues of security and difference were conjoined, mediated and mobilised in UK cities after the 7/7 London bombings of July 2005. We base this preliminary analysis on data gathered for a three year collaborative media ethnography carried out in eight cities across the UK (2004-07).<sup>1</sup> The primary analytical emphasis is on place and mobility so that the social and spatial *contexts* in which difference comes to matter and generate social insecurities can be better understood. We argue that ethnic, religious and national differences are triggered by 'critical events' (Das) and identities are mobilised in response to those events and to the media and public debates that ensue. Analysis of interview and observational data highlighting frequent oscillations between involvement in and detachment from critical events, such as 7/7, are at once physical, affective, cultural and political. The dynamics of such 'distant proximities' (Rosenau) encompass the polarities of integrative and disintegrative social forces, and are particularly apparent and open to analysis following critical events in the 'mediapolis'. The UK mediapolis was divided between *London*, where the attacks, though shocking and traumatic, were not entirely unexpected, and evoked a strong resilient response and 'vigilant visualities' (Amoore), and residents of *other cities*, for whom the 7/7 bombings were a largely media event, distant from their immediate everyday public life, and yet all the more disturbing. The 'media sensorium' (Gillespie and Bennett) emerges as a useful conceptual tool for analysing the intersecting dynamics of social, media and sensory experiences and their implications for the politics of 'mediapolis'.

## 1. Shifting Securities

We analyse data from a recent ethnographic study of citizens' perceptions of security and their engagement with news and politics since the 2003 Iraq war. The study *Shifting Securities*<sup>2</sup>, ran from 2004-07, and involved collaborative audience ethnography, critical discourse analysis of news media images and narratives identified as salient to national and social security concerns by audiences, and interviews with security policy-makers and journalists. Through repeated, extended interviews with the same families, households, friendship groups and individuals in twelve cities over a 30-month period, the study illuminated how perceptions and feelings of security and difference, insecurity and identity shift in response to events, spaces and places and, and the role played in these shifting perceptions by particular political modes of address, policies, news events, or direct personal experiences in everyday urban settings. The convenors of this workshop noted Silverstone considered the 'mediapolis' as a space of appearance, a single discursive and judgemental space – a moral space – with differing patterns of inclusion and exclusion. To the extent that the UK can be considered a mediapolis, *Shifting Securities* illuminated how people in UK cities lived with it; their relations and identifications to and with appearances.

## 2. London after 7/7: watching (out for) each other

Though few British Muslim respondents in the *Shifting Securities* study considered terrorism to be the primary threat to their security, the following account from a 26-year

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<sup>1</sup> [www.mediatingsecurity.com](http://www.mediatingsecurity.com)

<sup>2</sup> The *Shifting Securities* project was funded by the ESRC as part of its *New Security Challenges* research programme (Award Ref RES-223-25-0063). Full project details can be found at [www.mediatingsecurity.com](http://www.mediatingsecurity.com). For a list of publications from the project please contact the authors.

old British Muslim woman, Samira, suggests how she took seriously the threat of further terrorist attacks on London public transport:

Maybe even the Muslim community were being paranoid too, on the bus, I don't know whether I am being paranoid or something, but I feel that people are looking at me differently, maybe wondering whether I may be carrying a bomb. People wouldn't sit near the back of the bus, and any Asian especially male getting on the bus, people would be watching them more intently. I stopped taking a rucksack into work as a result. But then, I was the same to an extent. Unconsciously I was at the back of my mind a little suspicious of people on the bus on the tube as well. I hate to admit it but I was.

Visual culture is not just about visual or media images but encompasses everyday practices of seeing and being seen, visibility and invisibility (cf the paradoxical semiotics of the veil in the city) showing and being shown, recognition and misrecognition – the city enables multiple expressions of visual practice and in the securitisation following 7/7 we note time and again across our data the emergence of 'vigilant visualities' (Amoore), i.e. a watchful visuality. Sight becomes the 'sovereign sense'. We are urged to watch out for potential terrorists on the tube, moved to regard certain visible differences with suspicion – adopt an 'anticipatory gaze', waiting for the next attack (Hill) consistent with the precautionary principle of the 'war on terror'. Vigilant visualities become part of the extended apparatus of security policy.

Our study explored how sight intersected with touch and tactility through the issue of security. Looking at and being looked upon are part of the routine practices by which ontological security are achieved. To be looked at as a potential terrorist was to 'sense' the insecurity of others. Muslim interviewees reported the visceral discomfort their presence stimulated in others in public spaces. This created an ethical dilemma for both themselves and for those interviewees (like Samira above) who could not break this circuit of insecurity; some interviewees spoke of their own silence and avoidance tactics.

### **3. The emergence of a moral space**

The convenors of this workshop asked us to consider how media responded to and amplified the political remit of significant events connected to cities. Central to media coverage of 7/7 was the use of 'templates' (Kitzinger, 1999), interpreting breaking events through the prism of events past: in this case, either WW2 and the 'blitz spirit', or through the construction of a chain of Al-Qaeda attacks, from 9/11 and the Madrid bombings to imagined future attacks (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2007). For some weeks our data suggested the blitz template meshed with a multicultural ideal. Interviewees spoke of experiencing an imperative to fight for the values London represented, and in this case, these were taken to be multicultural values; a mobilising of integrative mentalities and centripetal social forces. Hence, alongside key speeches by political leaders (Ken, Tony), media inadvertently enabled a moral space, a mediapolis in which residents were willing to interrupt their vigilant watching and scanning of each other by showing hospitality, making the leap to speak out to reassure a (Muslim-looking) stranger<sup>3</sup>. This resonates with Silverstone's considerations on Derrida's concept of the gift.

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<sup>3</sup> Studies also indicate this occurred in NYC in the weeks after 9/11, e.g. Abrams et al. 'Contesting the New York Community: From Liminality to the "New Normal" in the Wake of September 11', *City & Community*, Volume 3, Number 3, September 2004, pp. 189-220(32).

### 3. Outside London after 7/7

Many respondents in London spoke of positive experiences, of people making an effort to act inclusively or hospitably to people they presumed to be Muslim. There are many accounts of acts of looking, of recognition and misrecognition, which require further analysis. Samira's profound sense of being under scrutiny, over exposed, visibly vulnerable and the sense that acts of looking and being seen generate modes of action and response in urban spaces is palpable. Anxiety surrounds local, mundane multiculturalism as mutual suspicions are generated because of inter-ocular, face-to-face, but also because of impressions gained from media consumption. The next account come from interviews in Swansea, where national and global 'war on terror' processes and discourses become manifest through local tensions concerning asylum seekers, welfare and public transport. An event such as 7/7 played out very differently here. In the next quote, Claire and Hayley, two white working class women in their twenties in Swansea, talk about not having any Muslim acquaintances and express their fear of Muslims on buses:

Claire: Well I don't really have a chance to meet that many [Muslims], and when I do there's always this instant mistrust there, I think like, it's stupid, but you know, you know they're not going to do anything, but there's always the fear that they might ... Especially on buses

Hayley: [...] I just notice them more, you know. And on trains, I'd be much more wary about where they are.

Hayley goes on to suggest that media play a role in demonising Muslims and that the latter may have valid claims and reason to 'lash out'. London and media coverage of the London bombings became a proxy configuration for the articulation of insecurity and political claims in other cities in the UK mediapolis. Interviewees in Edinburgh, Bradford, Swansea and elsewhere brought London into their relations and judgements, yet reported their own distance from the commercial, political and cultural centre that London represented to them. Indeed, London was a separate, dangerous place they would think twice about visiting.

### Conclusion

We hope our methodology offers some possibilities for fleshing out empirically notions such as 'mediapolis'. The research is at an early stage of analysis and we've not begun systematic comparison between cities. Nevertheless, the example of city sensoria after 7/7 indicates how mediated and mediatized events trigger particular political claims and relations, and create spaces for ethical reflection and decision. Additionally, we think the sensorium concept can be useful for understanding how people live with the imperatives of vigilant visualities – of relentlessly looking at being looked at – since these sensory relations are part of the mechanisms through which identities and political claims are mobilised.

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