The binary media discourse of terror

The kind of emotional audit illustrated in the previous chapter can contribute practically in shaping policy (here, counter-terrorism policy), and in informing community interventions. Our focus is on the use of emotional audits in the development of communication strategies. Emotional governance is conducted primarily through mass-mediated communications, and to conclude this case study we need to look at what communication strategies and media discourses currently exist, what impact we might expect these to have on audiences in the light of what we know about the emotional profile of the public, and what are the priorities for future communication work.

The basic objective is not to find techniques for promoting particular policy objectives or party-political interests, but to enhance the development of a public discourse which will make for the best possible democratic process. This will be a discourse in which accurate, relevant and in-depth information of many sorts is easily available and routinely underpins news reports, but also be one in which the emotional investments in and responses to the given issue of all groups in a society are acknowledged, discussed and processed. This would maximise the chances of different ‘publics’ feeling included in policy debates, and so being prepared to buy into or accept policy directions which were not their own first choices.

The aims and responsibilities of different agents in this process can involve difficult tensions. Obviously most organisations involved in public communication – the political, commercial, and cultural bodies whose communications provide much of the content of our public sphere – have axes to grind, and will want to achieve particular aims in
their communication activities. But as the doctrines of public service and of corporate social responsibility insist, they also have duties to maximise the public good, which in media and communication terms means contributing to public conversations which are inclusive, respectful, truth-seeking and open-ended. To this traditional list of democratic values, the idea of emotional governance adds the requirement of emotional literacy. There may not always be a contradiction between sectional and public interest, in that organisations or individuals who are seen to be making good contributions to the common weal (by making insightful, facilitative or creative inputs to public debate) may gain favour and credibility for their more partisan messages. But there are certainly some contradictions between two sets of principles of communication management: on the one hand those required for good contributions to the emotional public sphere, and on the other those established in the worlds of political and commercial persuasion, where manipulation of feelings rather than acknowledgement of and reflection upon them has been the norm.

Ideally, mapping the distribution of emotions amongst the public should be accompanied by a similar audit of mediaspace, which would enable us to identify the emotional content of the messages from relevant authorities, and consider their relationship to the profile of public emotion, and also to assess the emotional contributions from journalists and other mediators of those messages. However, conducting an emotional audit of the contents of the media around a certain topic is in some ways a more demanding exercise than auditing the public. While there are familiar procedures, based on self-report and on clinically-derived inferences, for finding out what people feel (which in the previous chapter we sought to use mainly in the analysis of polling data), assessing the emotional meaning of news media content is not a well-trodden path. There are difficult methodological questions about whether emotion can be said in some way to reside in the text or images, or is entirely in the minds of the audience, in which case just studying the media content itself may not be legitimate. Still, media content analysis of other sorts is a well-established area of media research, and it may be that the methods used in such analysis can be adapted for the purpose of emotional audit, or that other, existing data can be used, as we have used polling data for auditing the public mind.

To date there is not a large body of work on media discourses of terrorism. One of the first systematic studies of the media discourse of terrorism was by Schlesinger, Murdock and Elliott (1983). In their analysis of UK television news in 1981–82, they identified an ‘official’