Security and Publics: Democratic Times?

Introduction: on the reality of terror threats

At stake in many public debates surrounding security before and particularly after 11 September 2001 has been the veracity of definitions of terror threats. Why are there always such differing viewpoints about the ‘reality’ of threats? Why, in August 2006, did British Home Secretary John Reid (2006) feel the need to bluntly say that critics of anti-terror legislation ‘just don’t get it’ as to the threats facing Britain and elsewhere? Why do some people hold the view that the attacks of 9/11 or 7/7 were hoaxes or government conspiracies? Definitions of terror threats are vital to contemporary security debates because from those definitions all else follows: the attribution of hostile intent to certain groups posing the ‘threat’, the warranting of particular government policy responses to that ‘threat’, and citizens’ feelings of (in)security and whether they carry on living ‘normal’ lives. Definitions of terror threat are integral to the legitimacy of security measures and whether citizens grant consent to those policies.

We have seen in previous chapters how television plays a role in modulating the representation of threat and terror. This chapter locates these representations within an interaction order that extends beyond the screen, into the lives of audiences and citizens, and that includes government policies and political addresses. We examine the relation between media representations of terror and audiences’ perceptions of terror. The purpose of the chapter is to offer a tentative explanation of the differing perceptions of terror that lie at the root of so much security policy debates and practices.¹

The variation or inconsistency of media representations of terror and threat is exemplified by a single edition of The Independent from Saturday
12 August 2006, with ‘The enemy within?’ as its front-page headline.² This was related to the ongoing story of the terror plot to blow up nine aeroplanes flying between the United Kingdom and the United States and recent police arrests of suspects. The headline banner was accompanied by photos of suburban streets and road signs. The question of terror threat was directly raised. The newspaper’s first seven pages were devoted to reporting the story, with most reports describing the terror plot as ‘alleged’. However, one wrote of ‘the terrorist threat’ as if an objective fact (McSmith and Judd, 2006), and another of ‘the terrorist crisis’ (McSmith, 2006). Similarly, the main editorial described ‘people suspected of plotting’ this specific incident, but then more generally about ‘the threat to our societies’, writing that ‘the major terrorist threat today … [is] cottage-industries of terror’. The editorial was clear:

It is vital we recognise this reality. For our success in thwarting these attacks will rest largely on an accurate analysis of the nature of the threat we face. […] What we have here is a home-grown terrorist threat…unless we recognise this central truth…the ranks of this generation of fanatics can only be expected to grow.

(The Independent, 2006: 32)

With the newspaper’s voice having announced the ‘reality’ and ‘central truth’ of the ‘threat we face’, on the opposite page, star columnist Robert Fisk suggested the very opposite. Writing from Beirut during the Israel–Lebanon conflict of 12 July–14 August, Fisk (2006: 33) appeared to attack his own newspaper’s reporting:

And I notice with despair that our journalists again suck on the hind tit of authority, quoting endless (and anonymous) ‘security sources’ without once challenging their information and the timing of [Deputy Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police] Paul [Stephenson]’s ‘terror plot’ discoveries or the nature of the details – somehow, ‘fizzy drinks bottles’ doesn’t quite work for me.

The main authoritative voices – the reporting, the editorial, and the star columnist – in one issue of The Independent offered very different views on the nature of any terror ‘threat’.

These debates are epistemological in nature. They concern the nature of reality and how we know that reality: ‘knowledge that such-and-such is true’ (Klein, 2005). The reporting and the editorial in The Independent presented a reality composed of a specific alleged threat and a more