

Libraries and the War on Terror: The Power of Nightmares

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The original subtitle for this paper was Censorship and Diversity and, as you will see from your program, I was proposing to look at issues such as Clause 28 and homophobia, the tabloid press, various censorships, banned authors, Islamaphobia and the PATRIOT Act. I will still touch on some of these subjects but, in carrying out the research for this paper, I discovered that there are some more fundamental issues to explore, such as Human Rights. As a consequence I have changed the subtitle of this paper to The Power of Nightmares, and I have changed the contents to consider the threats which the so called War on Terror poses to our libraries and the communities we serve.

One threat is that government money is being diverted from UK public services, including libraries, to fund illegal invasions of sovereign nations. Another threat is that the fear and scaremongering engendered by the War on Terror is allowing the government to erode the civil liberties and democratic values which underpin our library services. The freedoms of information and expression have been reduced and undermined; censorship and surveillance are on the increase. The threat to our communities is that the War on Terror is creating tensions and divisions. The Muslim population has been alienated and many young Muslims radicalised. Asylum seekers, refugees and migrant workers (all lumped together by the tabloid press) are viewed with suspicion and hostility. The BNP has never been so strong. The threats to diversity and community cohesion are clear.

Before I go on I must declare an interest. I am an ardent opponent of the War on Terror and have been from the start. I went on Britain's biggest ever political demonstration in February 2003, against the war on Iraq, and I also opposed the illegal invasions of Yugoslavia and Afghanistan. On this issue – as on so many others – I am unashamedly subjective and reject calls by the professional to be objective, even handed, balanced, neutral or apolitical (whatever that means). Because how can you be neutral or objective or balanced about the breaking of international conventions, the mass slaughter of civilians and the destruction of civic infrastructure (including schools, hospitals and libraries) – all in the name of freedom and democracy?

If, at Umbrella 2003, which took place soon after the invasion of Iraq, I had said that the war would still be going on in four years time, that over 2000 Iraqi civilians a month would be killed, and that £4 million a day would be spent on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan few people would have believed me. By the time of Umbrella 2005 no weapons of mass destruction had been found, no links with Al Quida had been established and the US and UK intelligence forces had been exposed as exaggerating the threat from Saddam Hussein. 40,000 children had been displaced due to the violence and 818,000 were unable to go to school. In 2006 more than 34,000 Iraqi civilians were killed. And here we are at Umbrella 2007 and the situation is getting worse, the economy is in ruins, the levels of unemployment are massive and Iraq is heading towards civil war.

The Iraqi National Library was an early victim of the War on Terror and a symbol for the barbarism that followed. Today the library is open again but assassination, death

threats, aerial bombardment, street fighting and plunder are just some of the perils faced by the staff. The Director's diary notes that 'One of the old librarians, who suffers from heart problems, informed me that yesterday a group of armed men stopped the car she was travelling in. The men asked all the passengers for their IDs. After reading her full name they ordered her to get out of the car. Some of the other passengers intervened and succeeded in persuading the men not to kidnap her. It was a terrifying moment for her. She asked me to let her stay at home for a few days.'

So what is the War on Terror? Who are its winners and losers? And what has it got to do with libraries and diversity? The Home Secretary John Reid has described the War on Terror as 'a struggle for ideas and values.' Mark Curtis, on the other hand, claims that the War on Terror has replaced old and failed ideas and values. In his documentary, *The Power of Nightmares: The Rise of the Politics of Fear*, Curtis argued that during the 20th century politicians lost the power to inspire the masses, and that the optimistic visions and ideologies they had offered were perceived to have failed. The politicians consequently sought a new role that would restore their power and authority. According to Curtis: 'Instead of delivering dreams, politicians now promise to protect us from nightmares.' They do this by exaggerating the scale of the terrorist threat. Following the 9/11 attack US neo conservatives were able to convince George Bush to begin a War on Terror and to paint Al Quida as an international network of terrorists.

The arrests of various groups of suspected terrorists in the US failed to find any substantive evidence. Similarly, in the UK arrests under new terrorism laws have resulted in very few convictions, mostly for fund raising. Much of the media coverage

of potential terrorist attacks is also highly speculative and sensational. The result is a climate of fear that is completely irrational. But it is this fear that is being used to justify many of the extraordinary special measures that the government has introduced or proposed. Following the attacks on the London transport system in July 2005, the prime minister announced a series of measures aimed at weeding out extremism, including prohibitions on freedom of speech, the right to peaceful assembly and habeas corpus. This was necessary, he said, because ‘the rules had changed’.

The Threat to Civil Liberties

The Police and Criminal Evidence Act has transformed the powers of the police, allowing them to make arrests for minor offences such as dropping litter, or for protesting against the government. Once held, they can fingerprint, photograph and take DNA evidence from you – by force, if necessary – and hold it in a national database for ever, whether or not you are charged. The Prevention of Terrorism Act gives the police the power to carry out searches which do not have to be founded on reasonable suspicion. Control orders are a form of house arrest under which the liberty of the recipient is severely restricted upon an order made by the Home Secretary. The Campaign Against Criminalising Communities has claimed this is a ‘grave warning that no one is safe from punishment without trial and the government is moving further towards a police state.’ Despite these concerns, Lord Carlile has called for even tougher conditions on control orders.

While the Home Secretary continues to use the War on Terror as his mantra, others have challenged its validity and usefulness. The International Development Secretary Hilary Benn has suggested that the slogan War on Terror could strengthen militant

gangs by making them appear more powerful and better organised than they really are. The Director of Public Prosecutions has insisted that ‘there is no such thing as a war on terror.’ He warned of the ‘pernicious risk’ that a ‘fear driven and inappropriate’ response to the terrorist threat could easily lead Britain to abandon respect for the rule of law. He called for a ‘culture of legislative restraint’ when dealing with terrorism. The Chief Constable of Suffolk has called for a ‘debate about the ongoing erosion of civil liberties in the name of the fight against terrorism’.

However, the general public are not up in arms against these potential threats to their human rights. Government scaremongering, assisted by the tabloid media, has resulted in a majority of people being willing to give up their civil liberties to combat terrorism. Nearly a quarter of the people surveyed for the British Social attitudes study believed that torturing terror suspects would be a ‘price worth paying’ to combat the threat. And a staggering 50% found it acceptable to deny them a jury trial. 70% backed compulsory identity cards for all adults, while an astonishing 80% said that they would accept phone tapping and the electronic tagging of terrorist subjects. 35% even backed a ban on peaceful protests.

In his latest documentary series, *The Trap*, Curtis argues that military intervention in Iraq has provoked terrorist actions in the UK and these have in turn been used to justify restrictions of liberty. In its 2007 World Report Human Rights Watch warned that the War on Terrorism poses a growing threat to free expression. ‘Counter terrorism has given new vigour to some old forms of censorship, and created new ones’. In 2004 only three European countries had laws criminalising the glorification of terrorism. By 2006, thirty six countries had passed such laws, including the UK.

Another post 9/11 legacy took place on 30 March 2007 when the UN Human Rights Council passed a resolution that violated international standards on freedom of expression. This resolution stated that freedom of expression may be restricted ‘to ensure respect for religions and convictions’.

The Threat To Community Cohesion

The biggest British victims of The War on Terror have been the Muslim community which, prior to the hysteria created by 9/11, had lived relatively peacefully in the UK for many years. Our Muslim communities now live in fear – not of terrorism but of the state and its brands of state terrorism. The Archbishop of York has warned that Britain is in danger of ‘coming close to a police state’ in the wake of the arrest of suspected terrorists in Birmingham. He criticised 90 day detention, likening it to Uganda under the rule of Idi Amin. The Birmingham Central Mosque chairperson accused the government of ‘picking on’ Muslims in the wake of these ‘terror arrests’ He described the arrests as a ‘persecuting course of action’ which the government had taken to justify its terror laws. ‘They have invented this perception of a threat. To justify that, they have to maintain incidents to prove something is going on.’

One of the nine men arrested and later released in Birmingham over a much hyped plot to behead British soldiers, branded Britain ‘a police state for Muslims.’ A Birmingham Respect councillor felt that ‘The whole Muslim community in Birmingham has been on trial since the story broke, with people facing “Paki terrorist, go home” taunts and abuse.’ And a National Assembly Against racism spokesman condemned the ‘collective punishment of the Muslim community’, noting that the heightened racist climate that follows in the wake of such high profile anti terror raids

‘hurts everyone because the BNP thrives in such a climate – and the BNP attacks all minorities , not just Muslims.’

Another Muslim man, arrested in the name of national security, was detained without charge and now lives in a twilight world: tagged, free to go down the shops, but not allowed to talk on the phone. Having fled Algeria he came to England because of its excellent reputation on human rights. He now says ‘In Britain I have less rights than an animal.’

The Home Secretary has added to the fears of the Muslim community by proposing new anti terror measures, including plans to opt out of international human rights treaties (including the European Convention on Human Rights) to let the government impose tougher anti terror measures. The government also plans to give police unprecedented powers to stop and question anyone in Britain. Anyone who refuses to give their name or explain what they are doing could be charged with obstructing the police, found guilty of a criminal offence and fined up to £5,000. Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Hain has warned that the tough new restrictions could become ‘the domestic equivalent of Guantanamo Bay’. In his view ‘We cannot have a reincarnation of the old “sus” laws under which mostly black people and ethnic minorities were literally stopped on sight and that created a really bad atmosphere and an erosion of civil liberties.’ The Muslim Council of Britain has warned that the new powers would lead to young Muslim men being ‘disproportionately targeted. Our concern is that it will only succeed in driving a wedge between the police and sections of the Muslim community.’ The *Muslim News* also pointed to a ‘complete lack of confidence in the government and the police service in the Muslim community’.

An even more sinister suggestion is that university staff should snoop on students suspected of ‘extremism’. The government has described what it considers to be a serious threat posed by radical Muslims and has issued guidance to colleges and universities calling on them to monitor student activity. These plans were condemned by the University and Colleges Union (UCU) which backed a motion at its congress calling on members to ‘resist attempts by government to engage colleges and universities in activities which amount to increased surveillance of Muslim or other minority students and to the use of members of staff for such witch hunts.’ UCU general secretary Sally Hunt commented: ‘Delegates have made it clear that they will oppose government attempts to restrict academic freedom or free speech on campus. Universities must remain safe spaces for lecturers and students to discuss and debate all sorts of ideas, including those that some people may consider challenging, offensive and even extreme.’ The union expressed outrage at the ‘continuing demonisation of Muslim and other minority communities’.

The Threat to Libraries

These latest proposals to spy on students would include the reporting to police of student’s research activities, internet use and reading habits. If this sounds somewhat fanciful, we should remind ourselves of the current situation in the US, the home of the brave and the land of the free. The PATRIOT Act makes it illegal for librarians to refuse any police request to see what anyone is reading. Librarians can go to jail if they even contact a lawyer for advice. Section 215 of the PATRIOT Act allows the FBI to access records, including library records, without a warrant – or even telling anyone. There is no obligation on the authorities to show a reason to believe that the

subject of the surveillance order is engaged in criminal activity. The FBI can obtain a user's reading and web browsing documents without probable cause. There is a criminal ban on librarians revealing the use of Section 215 orders to their readers. In 2004 Congress voted not to amend the PATRIOT Act because the Justice Department claimed that 'a suspected terrorist had used e-mail services at a public library.'

In November 2006 a student of Iranian origin, was working in the library at the University of California when security guards asked to see his university identity card. When he failed to produce his ID card they ordered him to leave the library, but he refused, arguing that he was studying and he had to continue his research. The guards called the LA police which sent a patrol squad, armed with Tasers. In a video broadcast on the internet, you can see and hear how the police fired their laser stun gun several times at the student, who is screaming in pain and vehemently protesting. 'Here is your PATRIOT ACT, here is your abuse of power' cried the student in front of several classmates, powerless witnesses to the aggression.

In April 2007 a US librarian claimed that the PATRIOT Act invades privacy. In prepared testimony for a Senate panel he said the government uses the Act and other laws to learn, without proper judicial oversight or any after the fact review, what citizens are researching in libraries. The American Library Association and some library services have also challenged the Act. If anyone thinks that such an infringement of civil liberties could not happen in the UK, cast your minds back to the Poll Tax when enabling legislation was passed allowing authorised access to library records to locate Poll Tax defaulters. The Poll Tax was defeated but the enabling legislation remains.

Also, next time you do a Google search, remember that a record is kept of your computer's IP address and the browser that you used, along with details of the search itself. If you use Google Mail, then every message that you send and receive will have been automatically scanned in order to work out which adverts the website should show you. Google keeps data on that, along with records of which ads you clicked on and generic information such as how often and when you log in. Search data and email messages are kept on servers in the US where Google can be forced to hand them over to the government when it comes looking for personal data in the name of the War on Terror.

The money spent on destroying Iraqi infrastructure (including libraries) could have been spent on public services (including libraries) in the UK. We are constantly told that, despite being one of the world's richest countries, we cannot afford to sustain our existing level of public services. At the same time that we are being asked to tighten our belts in the NHS and local government, the official cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have surged massively. Britain's involvement in these conflicts cost £1.8 billion in 2006/07, compared with £1.2 billion in the previous year. Labour MP Alan Simpson condemned 'this tragic waste of money' and warned that the real cost was likely to be much higher than the official estimates. He accused ministers of 'throwing money into the mess of killing fields in Iraq and Afghanistan when we could be putting the same amount of money into the healing fields of the NHS.' The Stop the War Coalition said that the revelation that nearly £2 billion was being spent this year on wars would be 'pretty shocking to people who cannot get hospital beds or cannot get housing or are having to pay sky high fares.'

In his last Budget the Chancellor announced a further squeeze on public service spending while at the same time giving an extra £86 million for the war against terror at home, and an additional £400 million for the armed forces for operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Trade union leaders attacked the proposed pay cut for public sector workers as part of this ‘warfare not welfare’ budget. Lindsey German commented: ‘It is shocking for this government to be so militaristic while effectively cutting wages for people who care for our children, the elderly and the sick.’ It is clear that public services are one of the major losers in the War on Terror, while arms dealers and manufacturers are major winners – in 2006 the US (which spent \$528 billion on weapons) and the UK (which spent \$59.2 billion) were the world’s biggest military spenders. To paraphrase an old Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament slogan, ‘Wouldn’t it be nice if public services were given the money they need, and the armed forces had to hold jumble sales to raise funds for their overseas adventures.’

Those who take a narrow and limited view of libraries may still say, but what has the War on Terror got to do with us? We are a neutral, apolitical library and information profession. We should not get involved in matters which do not directly concern us. My answer to that is, the War on Terror has a direct effect on what we do (by diverting government funding away from public services) and a divisive effect on the communities we serve. It is in our professional interest to oppose the War on Terror. Libraries and Information are our business. But so too are Freedom of Expression, Freedom of Information and Human Rights. We must oppose any attacks on civil liberties especially those which have a disproportionate effect on our communities. We must oppose Censorship and stand up for Diversity and Community Cohesion.