

## Racial Profiling and Moral Panic: Operation Thread and the Al-Qaeda Sleeper Cell that Never Was \*

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***Abstract:***

In August 2003, Canadian and international media broke news of Operation Thread, executed by the Canadian state security apparatus to apprehend 23 South-Asian Muslim members of a “possible Al-Qaeda sleeper cell” in the Greater Toronto Area. After exposing the suspects to domestic and international opprobrium, the state security apparatus conceded that the allegations of terrorism were unfounded. Using material from the *National Post* and *The Globe and Mail*, this paper interrogates the mass mediation of Operation Thread as a case of racial profiling situated in a moral panic over “Islamic terrorism” that was created by a section of the Canadian news media and the state security apparatus. Particularly, it shows that the media contested the discourse of the state security apparatus, thus reflecting the contested nature of news as a social power resource. However, there is still a need for the media to be more critical when dealing with cases such as Operation Thread that are informed by racial profiling post September 11.

***Keywords:*** Islam; Moral Panic; Racial Profiling; Operation Thread; September 11; Terrorism

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**Résumé:**

En août 2003, les médias canadiens et internationaux ont fait état de l'opération "Thread", exécutée par la machine canadienne de sécurité de l'État, pour appréhender 23 musulmans sud-asiatiques, membres d'une cellule dormante possible d'Al-Qaeda dans la région du Grand Toronto. Après avoir exposé les suspects à l'opprobre national et international, la machine de sécurité de l'État a concédé que les allégations de terrorisme étaient non fondées. En utilisant des matériaux retrouvés dans les journaux *National Post* et *The Globe and Mail*, cet article s'interroge sur la médiatisation de masse de l'opération "Thread" comme un cas de profilage racial situé dans une panique morale sur la question du "terrorisme islamique", qui a été créée par une section des médias de nouvelles et de la machine de sécurité de l'État. En particulier, cela nous démontre que les médias ont contesté le discours de la machine de sécurité de l'État, reflétant ainsi la nature contestée des nouvelles en tant qu'une ressource de pouvoir social. Cependant, il y a encore un besoin pour les médias d'être plus critique dans des situations similaires à l'opération "Thread", qui sont informées par le profilage racial après le 11 septembre.

**Mots-clés:** Islam; Panique Morale; Profilage Racial; Opération "Thread"; 11 Septembre; Terrorisme

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**Introduction**

This paper reflects on the racial profiling of Muslims (particularly those of Arabic descent or belonging to other non-European ethnic minorities) as potential terrorists in Canada post-9/11, conceptualising this phenomenon as what Stan Cohen (1972; 2002) terms "moral panic", the mobilization of strong social sentiment against perceived threats to the social order. As a case in point, this paper interrogates the widely publicized Operation—or Project—Thread, which involved the arrest and detention of 22 Pakistanis and an Indian national in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) in 2003 by the Public Security and Anti-Terrorism Unit—a federal security task force—on later-discredited allegations that they were members of an *Al-Qaeda* sleeper cell. This paper adopts the definition of racial profiling as "the use by state authorities of racial, national, ethnic or religious characteristics as a means for determining who should be singled out for police or other investigatory activity" (Cohen, 2005: 240). However, in this paper, the focus is on the complementary roles played by state authorities (in this case, the state security apparatus) and a segment of the Canadian print media in the racial profiling and moral panic implicated in Operation Thread.

In its analysis, this paper uses material published by *The Globe and Mail* and *National Post* concerning Operation Thread. As well, it considers the phenomenon of post-9/11 racial profiling of Muslims, Arabs and other visible minorities in Canada and the associated moral panic as a derivative of the discourse of what Karim calls "Muslim terrorism" (2002: 102), the *a priori* articulation of Islam and these minority groups with terrorism. Although Operation Thread

was executed as far back as 2003, it is symptomatic and reflective of attitudes that prevail to this very day, as Sherene Razack's paper (2008) on post-9/11 racial profiling persuasively illustrates.

The paper begins by situating Operation Thread as a moment in the discourse<sup>1</sup> of 9/11 and "Muslim terrorism" so as to adequately contextualize the mass mediation of the operation as a moral panic. An explanation of the concept of moral panic as developed by Cohen is provided and located in the post-9/11 environment. Next, using an analytical discourse approach, the paper comparatively moves to an examination of the media narratives of Operation Thread in *The Globe and Mail* and the *National Post*, Canada's two nationally circulated newspapers, and exposes the extent to which these narratives reproduced a moral panic and the racial profiling of the suspects as terrorists. This paper concludes that in the case of Operation Thread, *The Globe and Mail* and the *National Post* initially privileged the discourse of the state security apparatus and also acted in concert with the Canadian security apparatus in generating a moral panic in which young Muslims of Arabic descent or hailing from other ethnic minority groups were framed as what Cohen calls "folk devils" (2002: 2) or targets of the moral panic. Although it is suggested here that the contested nature of news-work creates space for intervention within the media sphere to combat the perpetuation of racial profiling, marginalized groups are less able to influence media narratives. As well, false alarms such as Operation Thread can make real future terrorist threats appear less credible to the public. Given their social responsibilities, the media must therefore be more critical of state security discourses when presented with cases like Operation Thread.

### **9/11, "Muslim Terrorism", and Operation Thread**

It is important to situate Operation Thread within the wider context of the discourse of the 9/11 Al-Qaeda terrorist attacks and the related discourse of "Muslim terrorism" (Karim, 2002: 102) that, without foundation, associates Islam, Muslims, Arabs, and some ethnic minorities with terrorism. In this regard, it is useful to note a number of elements germane to both the 9/11 and Operation Thread discourses.

As a review of the 9/11 Commission Report reflects, Islam, Arabs, Muslims (and relevant to Operation Thread, Pakistan) are all vital moments in the articulation of the post-9/11 discourse of terrorism (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 2004). Al-Qaeda articulates as moments of its discourse, Islam and the cause of Arabs worldwide. Since 1992, Osama Bin Laden has issued calls for attacks against some Western states (including Canada) and the United States, in particular, in aid of what he purports to be a worldwide Islamic cause. The fact that the Operation Thread suspects were predominantly Pakistani is material to the extent that Pakistan features prominently in the 9/11 narrative. It appears that the majority of the 9/11 terrorists transited through Pakistan either to or from Al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan. Also, Pakistan seems to be an alternative refuge for Al-Qaeda operatives, and some of its high-ranking officers (such as alleged 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, himself of Pakistani origin) have been apprehended there.

However, the discourse of "Muslim terrorism" precedes 9/11. Writing on the theme of journalism after 9/11, Karim argues that historically, journalistic narrative templates for reporting on terrorism have drawn on dominant cultural constructions of "Muslim terrorism". Karim's views are influenced by Edward Said's (1978) seminal thesis on Orientalism. Said argues that notions of the "Orient" and "Occident" are all ideological constructs. He views the concept of the "Orientalism" as a consequence of historical socio-economic dominance that has

permitted dominant Western hegemonic misrepresentations and othering of the so-called Oriental. Said (1981) extends this viewpoint to dominant media coverage of Islam, regarding such reportage as characterized by essentialism and generalization. As well, such reportage is driven by an often unstated fear that Western civilisation is threatened by Islam. A classic example of this phenomenon is the current controversy in Switzerland over the construction of minarets, which some Swiss politicians associate with militant Islam (Campbell, 2009: 24).

This paper suggests, however, that 9/11 further exacerbated the existing construct of “Muslim terrorism” that Karim discusses. The events of 9/11 created a new dimension of security concerns in the Western world about “Muslim terrorism”. This is due not only to the unimaginable catastrophe that the attacks caused in terms of lives and infrastructure in the United States, but also because of the extent to which the 9/11 terrorists immersed themselves (and seemingly blended) into Western society prior to the attacks. If, for some in the West, the concept of “Muslim terrorism” was mainly abstract and confined to “typical” geographical contexts such as the Middle East, 9/11 transformed this abstract concept in the public imaginary into a palpable threat that has the potential to infiltrate Western communities, a threat that the 9/11 Commission framed in its report as “a new kind of terrorism” (2004: 71). Thus, concerns about this threat have motivated a new wave of moral panics about Arabs and Muslims (and some ethnic minorities) in Western societies. This is the background against which one must consider Operation Thread.

### **Operation Thread**

In late-August 2003, the Canadian and international mass media reported that 19 individuals (later 23, made up of 22 Pakistanis and one Indian, as previously mentioned) had been arrested and detained by Canadian state security agents as part of Operation Thread, targeting a “possible Al-Qaeda sleeper cell” (Freeze & Jimenez, 2003: A1) in the GTA. While investigations continued into the actions of these individuals, they were routinely described in the mass-mediated official discourse of the Canadian state security apparatus as belonging to a “group”. They were linked together by the circumstantial and equivocal fact that among them were several individuals registered with the Ottawa Business College. This institution had provided foreigners with false academic credentials to stay in Canada as students. Some of the suspects were accused of having shown an unhealthy interest in Canadian and U.S. landmarks. Another student had taken flying lessons, eerily reminiscent of the 9/11 terrorists, some of whom themselves had taken flying lessons to carry out the attack. Hinting that the race and religion of the suspects were vital factors in the Operation Thread takedown, a four-page state security backgrounder quoted by news media indicated as follows: “The men are all from or have connections to the Punjab province in Pakistan that is noted for Sunni extremism” (Humphreys & Blackwell, 2003: A4). A few weeks after the operation, however, some news media began questioning its validity, especially as several of the suspects were either granted bail or deported for violating immigration laws and not on the grounds of participating in terrorist activity, as previously announced.<sup>2</sup>

It is clear from the foregoing that the post-9/11 environment fostered a conjuncture and contingency that created the possibility to articulate the otherwise innocuous elements of the Operation Thread story (young Pakistani, Muslim, male students attending a potentially bogus college in a major North American city) to arrive at the conclusion that the individuals in question were potential terrorists. Operation Thread was therefore a moral panic that created

unfounded fears of a real terrorist threat in the GTA, based on the racial profiles of the suspects. Indeed, Operation Thread was symptomatic of the post-9/11 moral panic that motivated the rendition of some Canadian Muslims or Arabs such as Maher Arar to countries with dubious human rights records on the unfounded grounds that these individuals were terrorists.

### **Moral Panic**

Stan Cohen's seminal *Folk devils and moral panics: The creation of the Mods and Rockers* (1972; 2002) is often referenced for the definition of moral panic (Altheide, 2009: 79-80; Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke & Roberts, 1978: 16; Hier & Greenberg, 2002: 140). Cohen adopted Jock Young's (1971) concept elaborating the notion of moral panic as:

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible.

(Cohen, 2002: 1)

Moral panic, therefore, involves the mobilization of strong social sentiment against "real or imagined" (Hier & Greenberg, 2002: 140) threats to social order or well-being, thus giving rise to calls for corrective action. Cohen (2002) suggests that from the media angle, the propensity for moral panics emanates from the media's organisational logic (an orientation towards newsworthiness as an organisational goal) and the indignation that the media generate when they highlight matters of public concern. On the role of state security agents in moral panics, Young (1971) argues that the police, given their public role, are motivated to act against deviants towards whom there is the strongest public indignation and who are rendered more visible as subjects of moral panics fanned by the media. Consequently, state security agents are also susceptible to conjunctures conducive to articulating facts and evidence to "fit these pre-conceived stereotypes" (Young, 1971: 27). Thus, in pursuit of organisational efficiencies and influenced by media-reproduced moral panics, state security actors are liable to "jump the gap between...theoretical and empirical guilt" (Ibid: 44). Drawing from the previous discussion, it is suggested that the media, given their operational and organisational philosophies, are influenced by state security characterizations of deviancy, considering that state agents are effectively what Ericson, Baranek, and Chan (1991: 5) refer to as "authorized knowers", sources whose information can be given weight due to their social status. Hence, in the context of moral panics, there are complementarities between the state security apparatus and the news media in the mutual construction of reality, the definition of social problems, and the proposal of solutions to these problems.

A number of moments constitute the conceptual discourse of moral panic (Cohen, 2002; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). Firstly, there is a high level of concern that the conduct of a section of society poses a serious risk to the social order. Secondly, mainstream society develops hostility towards members of that section of society and thereby regards this group as being folk

devils. These folk devils are the ideological or symbolic representation (Cohen, 2002; Hier & Greenberg, 2002) of society's real fears. For example, in an era when society is shaken by the collective insecurity that terrorism generates, the section of society that adheres to a "different" religion and culture becomes more susceptible to being labelled as a threat even if a majority of its number are law-abiding. This naturally requires that this "problematic" section of society be "othered". Thirdly, there must be a relatively wide social consensus about the risk these folk devils pose, thereby requiring corrective action. Fourthly, the subsequent state-society action regarding these folk devils must be disproportionate to any real risks that the folk devils might possibly pose. Fifthly, these moral panics quickly reach a fever pitch and then abate due to shifts in audience interest or other dynamics that impact news production. This fifth point requires some clarification, because it might imply that moral panics are merely episodic. However, within the post-9/11 environment, this is not the case. As Malcolm M. Feeley and Jonathan Simon observe, in the current environment, "moral panics have become more institutionalised, transformed from ad hoc, episodic, and short-lived occurrences into regularly orchestrated campaigns; indeed, into a permanent condition of personal insecurity" (2007: 44). They argue that "in this social world, moral panics are part of the infrastructure of contemporary society, so much that the degree of specific episodes of real or imagined violence is of no real salience" (Ibid: 46).

As well, one must understand moral panic theory as embracing the totality of contributions to cases of moral panic. Thus, the police and mass media are not the only actors in this dynamic. Rather, a moral panic "is a collective endeavour" (Young, 2007: 56) that includes not just state security agents and the media, but also the public and, sometimes, the targets of the moral panic. Hence, thinking of a moral panic requires a holistic understanding of how various factors contribute to its emergence.

### **Operation Thread: Constructing a Moral Panic**

To understand how Operation Thread was constructed as narrative within the Canadian public sphere, this study adopted a discourse analysis approach in interrogating material on Operation Thread from *The Globe and Mail* and the *National Post* between 23 August and 26 September, 2003. This period saw the most prolific media reportage of the event. Both newspapers were available through the electronic database ProQuest Canadian Newsstand, and a search using the keywords "Operation Thread" and "Project Thread" produced the relevant items. Print copies of the newspapers were also reviewed to locate related information. However, for the purpose of analysis, this study relied on print-copy versions of the news items so as to capture the positioning and formatting of the stories, as these are meaning-conveyors, as well. In all, 35 print news media items (25 from *The Globe and Mail* and 10 from the *National Post*) were analysed. The examined coverage consists of different newspaper genres, such as news stories, features/comments, editorials and letters to the editor. *The Globe and Mail* and the *National Post* were chosen because they have nation-wide circulation and therefore have a greater potential to address a geographically-wide and diverse readership with their stories. However, these two newspapers do not necessarily represent the editorial positions of all Canadian news media.<sup>3</sup> That said, how these two newspapers covered Operation Thread is indicative of how the media collaborate with the state security apparatus in constructing moral panics.

### **The *National Post*'s Coverage of Operation Thread**

The first mention of Operation Thread in the *National Post* was on 23 August, 2003 in a story headlined “Canadian Arrests Mirror 9/11: Detainee Trained to Fly” (Humphreys & Blackwell, 2003: A4). Hall Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, and Roberts (1978), Karim (2003), and Teun van Dijk (1998) emphasize the significance of headlines in media analysis, especially their role in defining the information considered crucial by a newspaper. Predictably, therefore, the story makes connections between the “suspicious activities” of the suspects and 9/11. As well, the *National Post* relies heavily on a government backgrounder as its source of the story and reports the observation by officials that “most are between 18 and 33 who, with one exception, have connections to Pakistan’s Punjab province, noted for its Sunni Muslim extremism” (Humphreys & Blackwell, 2003: A4).

In its very first account of the operation, therefore, The *National Post* privileges official voices and treats various government officials and, to a lesser degree, defence counsel as authorised knowers. It also manages its information in a manner that places a dominant meaning on the story, inspiring the belief that the suspects are really potential 9/11-style terrorists. Underscoring this point, the newspaper positions an aerial photograph of the Pickering nuclear plant above the story, with the caption: “One of the 19 Pakistani nationals arrested in the anti-terrorism probe trained to fly over the Pickering nuclear power plant...raising concerns about Canada’s vulnerability to a terrorist attack” (Humphreys & Blackwell, 2003: A4).

The *National Post* continues with its reportage of Operation Thread on 26 August, 2003 in the same 9/11 typification. Under the headline, “Immigration authorities name arrested Pakistanis” (Bell, 2003: A2), the paper repeats the information it previously gave about the “suspicious behaviour” of the suspects. To provide greater local coherence, the suspects are described in the second paragraph of the story as being members of a “network”. Thereafter, the unlawful actions of any one of them are automatically made to represent all of the 19. This “group crime” (Henry & Tator, 2002) discursive device shores up the view that the suspects were acting in concert.

The theme that the suspects were part of an “Al-Qaeda sleeper cell” is further developed in the *National Post*'s 29 August, 2003 edition, focusing more on individual suspects, but again employing the group crime device. Under the heading “Police investigate ‘sleeper cell’ as two terrorist suspects are released”, a continuation of a front page story titled “Police hunt ringleader of alleged terror cell: CN Tower plot suspected” (Bell, 2003: A1), the *National Post* plays down the fact that despite the seemingly watertight arguments of the security apparatus mediated thus far, two of the suspects had been granted bail. As well, the story’s front-page headline privileges the preferred perspective of the security apparatus: that there is indeed a threat to national security. However, buried in a less conspicuous section of the paper (Ibid), the heading regarding the release of the two suspects is rendered even less consequential by being placed underneath a sentence to the effect that the security apparatus is still investigating the “sleeper cell”.

Yet, it is important to note that the *National Post* did not ignore oppositional voices—through referring to Muslim groups (or lawyers of the accused who contend that the operation) in its reportages. However, as Karim observes, even though the media might act as sites of contestation for various views and, therefore, mediate oppositional or alternative perspectives, such narratives are often “subverted” (2002: 105) by formatting techniques. Thus, in the *National Post*'s stories, one notices that the oppositional discourses from Muslim communities

and lawyers of the accused were often placed inconspicuously, buried between layers of dominant discourse.

It can also be observed that on 26 September, 2003, when the *National Post* reports that Anwar-Ur-Rehman Mohammed (the suspect who had taken the flight lessons) has been released on bond due to the failure of the security apparatus, to prove that he is a security threat, this story is dwarfed by a report titled “‘Clean Up’ School Racket, Ottawa Told” (Friscolanti, 2003: A4), which castigated the Federal Liberal government for its failure to check the “unbridled growth” of “visa schools”. By according the story of Mohammed’s release less importance significance, the paper mitigates the fact that the dominant discourse regarding Operation Thread is coming apart.

Similarly, the editorial “Watching who gets in” was published on the same day, reflecting the spirit of the *National Post*’s discourse on Operation Thread. The newspaper commented that, “The events of 9/11 demonstrated that one method used by would-be terrorists to enter or remain in the United States is obtaining a student visa. There’s no reason why they wouldn’t try the same tactic here” (2002: A21). It is evident from the totality of the *National Post*’s coverage of Operation Thread that the views rendered in this editorial resonate with the views of right-leaning politicians—such as then Ontario Minister of Public Security Bob Runciman who is often referenced in the paper’s coverage of the operation—and the security apparatus. The general theme of these shared views is that the origins and lifestyles of the suspects, against the background of 9/11, suggests a high possibility that they were part of an Al-Qaeda sleeper cell. In this regard, the *National Post*’s role in the Operation Thread saga can be seen as a reinforcing and legitimating function. The newspaper reinforced the actions of the state security apparatus and also supported and legitimated the discourse shared with the state security apparatus and right-wing political groups.

### ***The Globe and Mail*’s Coverage of Operation Thread**

Like the *National Post*, *The Globe and Mail* first reported on Operation Thread on 23 August, 2003. Though less extensive than the first coverage afforded by the *National Post*, *The Globe and Mail*’s first report on the operation provided similar strips to frame the operation as Canada’s answer to 9/11: a theme suggested by the headline “19 terror suspects arrested, fear grows of Canadian 9/11” (Freeze, 2003: A1). *The Globe and Mail* also relied heavily on the government backgrounder about the operation and mediated similar, but fewer voices as compared to the *National Post*. Though less dense in terms of accessed voices and insinuations, *The Globe and Mail* points out the irony that while the government is denying that the suspects are deemed national security threats, national security is being invoked to keep them in prison. Thus, though the newspaper relied heavily on state sources for the story, it problematized the state’s approach to the matter.

*The Globe and Mail*’s subsequent story of Operation Thread on 26 August, 2003 however departed from the initial framing schema. Titled “Terror allegations against 19 termed ‘garbage’” (Freeze, 2003: A3), the paper gave more prominence to oppositional voices—such as different lawyers of the suspects and aircraft training industry officials—who pointed out that the conduct and flight plan of the trainee-pilot suspect was not unusual. This structure of reportage was identifiable in much of the coverage *The Globe and Mail* gave to the operation. As well, unlike the *National Post*, *The Globe and Mail* regularly referred to the suspects themselves. Furthermore, *The Globe and Mail* did not refrain from giving the last word to the suspects or

their interlocutors, so that they are positioned as debunking some of the allegations made against them. *The Globe and Mail* was also more discursive, providing information about the ramifications of post-9/11 terrorism and immigration legislation.

That said, unlike the *National Post*, which seems to have been explicit in its ideological posture regarding Operation Thread, *The Globe and Mail* was more subtle in mediating its perspective on the operation. When reporting on 28 August, 2003 that one of the suspects had been freed by an immigration adjudicator, the paper gives the subject of the release more prominence than the *National Post*, assigning the news the front page headline “Adjudicator frees suspect, disputes terrorist scenario” (Freeze & Jimenez, 2003: A1). Similarly, *The Globe and Mail*’s 26 August, 2003 story, gives prominence to oppositional discourse, in both cases even assigning oppositional voices headline status.

However, the paper makes the adjudicator, Aina Martens, the main subject of its reportage, noting that other adjudicators faced with similar facts had come to the conclusion that the accused should remain in custody. The story also notes that “[w]hen counsel for Immigration Minister Denis Coderre suggested Ms. Martens had made an error in law, Ms. Martens shut down debate and told the counsellor to save her arguments for the Federal Court of Canada” (Freeze & Jimenez, 2003: A1). The newspaper strategically ends the story by wondering whether Martens has been assigned to preside over any further cases. The report thus implies that Martens is being unreasonable, and hence, without showing its hand, *The Globe and Mail*, in this instance, indirectly legitimated the perspective of the security apparatus.

Compared to the *National Post*, and while it gives more than sufficient space to oppositional voices in its stories published between 23 and 29 August, 2003, *The Globe and Mail* presents many details about the alleged (mis)conduct of the suspects, sometimes by way of the argumentative device of repetition. The paper also highlights the new legislative framework within which the operation had been undertaken. This made the case of the state seem more rational and convincing than the unabashedly partisan *National Post* does.

The concurrence of discourse between *The Globe and Mail* and the security apparatus is palpable in an editorial from 29 August, 2003 titled, “The arguments made in protection’s name” (A16). Unlike the *National Post*, which blatantly editorialised that the current situation calls for the racial profiling of Arabs (“Profiles in prudence”, 20 September, 2001: A17), *The Globe and Mail*’s editorial is more subtle, engaging in the “discourse of denial” (Henry & Tator, 2002: 82; Jiwani, 2006: 3) of racism. *The Globe and Mail* argues *inter alia*, “That they are all Muslim, 18 of them from Pakistan (and one from India), was enough to prompt further questions. But they were arrested because of a pattern of behaviour they engaged in, not because they were Muslims or Pakistanis” (29 August, 2003: A16). The newspaper also notes:

Is the suspicion of a security risk reasonable? The thrust of the allegations is that a group of men, who appear to have gone to the same schools in Pakistan, have shared in their misrepresentation of their purpose in Canada, and have lived together here in suspicious ways—moving among bare apartments, having several unexplained fires in their apartments, in one apartment allegedly having airplane schematics and pictures of guns on the wall, and in one man’s case taking flying lessons. . . . The Canadian government says it has three vanloads of evidence, including computer hard drives, passports and phone records, that it wants time scrutinize. It should be permitted time to do so—a month seems reasonable—to come back with a stronger case.

*The Globe and Mail*—(29 August, 2003: A16)

Here, by becoming an agent of legitimation for the state security apparatus or what Althusser (1971: 157) calls “the repressive state apparatus”, the newspaper itself becomes a repressive apparatus and an agent of social control.

Oddly, however, a story about Operation Thread in that same edition of *The Globe and Mail* titled, “Student pilot ordered to remain in custody” (Freeze, 2003: A3) highlights the fact that the government lacked evidence that the suspects were a security threat. Indeed, the slant of the report seems aimed at diffusing fears that the suspects are potential terrorists. However, at the bottom of the story, readers are referred to the editorial, which, as mentioned above, has a more discursively pro-security apparatus tone. The effect of this device is to mitigate any force that the oppositional discourses in the news report might have.

The most interesting difference between the *National Post* and *The Globe and Mail* in their respective coverage of Operation Thread is that while the *National Post* consistently maintained a strident tone in support of the security apparatus, *The Globe and Mail*, which at certain times seemed to legitimate and normalize the actions of the security apparatus, abruptly changed tack on 30 August, 2003 after the publication of the editorial discussed above. In a full-page news story titled, “Case of 19 terrorists starts to unravel” (Jimenez, Freeze & Burnett, 2003: A5), it is insinuated that the suspects have suffered unduly as the security apparatus seemed to be backing away from the terrorism-related allegations. The reporters added that,

After they were jailed on the grounds that they could pose a risk to Canada’s national security, the case made headlines around the world as the newsmedia quoted a government official’s now infamous words: “I guess the easiest way of putting it is there is a suggestion they might in fact, perhaps be a sleeper cell for Al-Qaeda” . . . But the case of the terrorists among us began to unravel almost as soon as the detention reviews began, with the RCMP and Citizenship and Immigration Canada distancing themselves from the idea that the men posed a clear threat to society.

(Jimenez, Freeze & Burnett, 2003: A5)

Here, *The Globe and Mail*’s writers ridicule the security apparatus, a strategy that is repeated in the September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2003 issue of the paper in a report titled, “Wanted man can’t turn himself in” (Jimenez, 2003: A1). This report indicates that despite concerns created by the security apparatus about the risk the suspects posed, it had failed or neglected to arrest one of them, even though he tried to turn himself in.

A follow-up story the next day continues in the same vein of ridiculing the security apparatus, with the headline, “Alleged terrorist has to wait to give up” (Gagne, 2003: A8). It includes a picture of suspect Muddasar Awan knocking on the doors of the RCMP so he can be arrested. In a related story on 9 September 2003 (Freeze, 2003: A4), the paper describes the operation as “controversial”. A feature article on 4 September 2003 by regular columnist Christie Blatchford pokes fun at the security apparatus and is succinctly titled, “Kafka meets the Keystone Kops at Pakistani’s detention review” (2003: A17).

In summary, *The Globe and Mail* gave a lengthier and discursive treatment to Operation Thread. In its mediation, the paper afforded space not only to the voices of the state and its security apparatus, but also to the oppositional voices of the suspects, their lawyers and social commentators. It also brought the personal lives of the suspects into relief, evoking sympathy for the suspects with the headline, “All my dreams have been disturbed—I don’t want to go back to

Pakistan labelled as a terrorist” (Jimenez, 2003: A1). Yet, the paper exhibited some hypocrisy by castigating and ridiculing the state security apparatus after 29 August 2003 for having cried wolf, while failing to accept culpability for its part in the moral panic that was created.

From the inception of the case within the public domain, the security apparatus grudgingly intimated that national security and terrorism were not *necessarily* implicated in the decision to arrest the suspects, thereby creating a certain level of ambiguity around the operation. Instead of demanding clarity and accountability from the security apparatus, the newspaper tagged along, privileging, legitimating and seeking public consensus for the security apparatus’ discourse, until the security apparatus categorically distanced itself from the allegation that the suspects were a security threat. *The Globe and Mail*, like the *National Post*, acted as an ally of the state and its security apparatus and deferred to the state’s authorized knowers. In the next section, this paper concludes by summarising the ramifications of Operation Thread vis-à-vis the racial profiling implicit in the moral panic fuelled about a GTA-based Al-Qaeda sleeper cell.

### **The State Security Apparatus, News Media, and Operation Thread**

As stated above, this research shows that a segment of the Canadian news media and the state security apparatus effectively generated a moral panic through their misrepresentations of the threat posed by the Operation Thread suspects. In studying the news items, it became clear that the main source of the information about Operation Thread from which the two newspapers framed their stories was the four-page document released by the Canadian security apparatus after apprehending the first 19 of the 23 suspects. This document provided particulars of the conduct of the suspects that motivated their arrests. While it was made to seem in the document that the general thread connecting the suspects was their enrolment at the Ottawa Business College, it appears, rather, that it was their ethnic and religious profiles: “Most are between 18 and 33 who, with one exception, have connections to Pakistan’s Punjab province, noted for its Sunni extremism” (Humphreys & Blackwell, 2003: A4). In other words, the suspects fit the profile of potential terrorists because of their ethnic and religious backgrounds.

This analysis also confirmed that with respect to Operation Thread, the ideas that informed the actions and discourses of the state security apparatus as well as some of its interlocutors drew heavily on the dominant discourse of “Muslim terrorism” in the post-9/11 era. Thus, the indicia of terrorism that the security apparatus deemed to be proof of the suspects’ guilt made sense only within the framework of post-9/11 cognitions about Islam, Arabs and Muslims in the Western world, bolstered by prior-existing notions of “Muslim terrorism”. Therefore, as Young (2007) argues, the apparatuses of social control are not the only actors in the creation of moral panics; there are social factors that indirectly determine the “script” (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke & Roberts, 1978: 52) that these actors follow. The determining social factors include ingrained dominant racist notions of “Muslim terrorism”.

However, to borrow from Hall *et al* (Ibid), the state security apparatus and mass media “formed part of the circle out of which the moral panic developed”. They created a moral panic by putting a name and meaning to the disparate actions of the suspects and heightened concerns about a non-existent Al-Qaeda sleeper cell. As this study confirms, the 23 suspects mentioned above (as well as young Arabs or ethnic minority Muslims in the West) represent the folk devil in the post-9/11 moral panic that Operation Thread manifested. Consequently, though the threat itself is ultimately one of “Muslim terrorism”, young Arabs and ethnic minority Muslims serve

as the objects by which the threat can be mediated, recognised by the public, surveilled and controlled by the relevant state apparatuses.

In light of this research, it would be erroneous to suggest that the two newspapers handled Operation Thread in a homogenous fashion. While the *National Post* consistently privileged the perspective of the state and its security apparatus, *The Globe and Mail* consistently gave space to the voices of the suspects and their advocates and, at a certain point, became less supportive of the state security apparatus' discourse. This evinces not just the contested nature of news production, but also the fact that the news media are influenced by their own discourses. It can be said that the extent to which the news media privilege a discourse is determined by the extent to which that discourse is in concordance with an individual news organisation's own posture. Since the *National Post* is known to have a right-of-centre orientation (Henry & Tator 2002: 137), it is not surprising that, in a Foucauldian sense, this newspaper generally privileged the "knowledges" of right-of-centre interlocutors regarding the operation. On the other hand, as its 29 August, 2003 editorial reveals, although *The Globe and Mail* tries to project a more centrist discursive stance than its counterpart, it, too, is oriented towards the right.

By relying on the establishment and authorized knowers, the news media are able to indemnify themselves should information later prove incorrect, in which case they can legitimately pin the blame on the authorized knowers, as *The Globe and Mail* sought to do.<sup>4</sup> These factors taken together suggest that *The Globe and Mail* might have altered its stance on Operation Thread simply because, in the words of one its reporters, even "the RCMP and Citizenship and Immigration Canada" had began "distancing themselves from the idea that the men posed a clear threat to security" (Jimenez, Freeze & Burnett, 2003: A5). To erase its role in the creation of the Operation Thread moral panic, the paper may have found it necessary to reposition itself as an advocate for civil liberties. Yet the complicity of *The Globe and Mail* in the creation of the moral panic is betrayed by its entertainment of the dominant discourses regarding the case, even though from the very beginning the state could not conclusively say that it had a case of terrorism on its hands.

As this research demonstrates, the state security apparatus' discourses were not always and totally dominant, at least in *The Globe and Mail*. Not only were they disputed by the suspects, their interlocutors (both in the courtroom and in the media), and some Muslim groups, but the media also sometimes contested the security apparatus' truth claims. As noted above, this confirms the theory of the contested nature of news articulated by Ericson, Baranek, and Chan (1991). As Hier and Greenberg observe, "News coverage acts as a 'discursive space' in which social agents struggle to penetrate the narratives around which news is constructed" (2002: 138). Thus, though the media may be allied to the security apparatus, the ability of the latter to impose its meanings continuously cannot be taken for granted. This indicates the potential for oppositional discourses to become moments in the articulation of mainstream news discourse.<sup>5</sup> However, the Supreme Court of Canada in *R. v. Golden* ([2001] 3 SCR 679), acknowledges the over-policing of minorities in Canada and the need to use legislative means to prevent racial stereotyping by state security operatives (Cohen, 2005: 240). To the extent that ethnic minorities in Canada cannot easily defend themselves, Cohen finds the potential for racial profiling to be a problematic issue. This point resonates with the main rationale of this paper. Racial profiling and moral panics in the post-9/11 environment are a dangerous combination because of the potential for innocent and relatively defenceless ethnic minorities to fall victim to an Operation Thread scenario. As well, fiascos such as Operation Thread can make the public less-believing in the event of real future terrorist threats. Therefore, if the media are to be accountable to their

responsibilities in the Canadian public sphere, they must be more critical of state security discourses that are potentially motivated by racial profiling.

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## Notes

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  - 1 In this paper, the use of the word “discourse” is informed by the discourse theory offered by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001: 105). They regard discourse as an “articulation” (or connection) of “elements” (potential components in the articulation) and “moments” (elements that are finally included as components in the articulation). For example, in constructing a news story, a journalist would choose a major theme (or “nodal point”) and then consider facts that can be potentially included (elements). In the final analysis, the journalist (or editor) makes a judgment call on the facts that must be indeed included (moments) or excluded. This theory is applicable not only to speech situations but also to social formations.
  - 2 All but three of the suspects were deported from Canada (Shephard, 2006: A4). Canadian journalists who interviewed the deported suspects report complaints of further police investigations and vigilante attacks, failed spousal engagements, loss of jobs and concern for future job prospects, estrangement from family and friends and fear of the loss of freedom to travel (Bell, 2004: A1; Shephard & Verma, 2003: A4; Verma, 2004: A4). Interestingly, a story in the *Toronto Star*, based on documents obtained through an access to information request, reports that the RCMP regards the Operation Thread saga as an “embarrassment to the government of Canada” (Shephard, 2006: A6).
  - 3 *The Toronto Star*, for example, adopts a more progressive editorial posture. The choice behind the use of *The Globe and Mail* and the *National Post* is merely for the purpose of comparing the only two national papers, which are also regarded as having different editorial postures. As well, as Smolash (2009) notes in her analysis *The Globe and Mail* and the *National Post*’s treatment of Operation Thread and another anti-terrorism operation, trends in the English-Canadian press do not necessarily reflect attitudes in the French-Canadian press. This paper study and its results, therefore, pertain more to the English-Canadian media.
  - 4 Curiously, a spokesperson for Immigration and Citizenship Canada later accused the media of placing a terror “spin” on the operation (Jimenez, Freeze & Burnett, 2003: A5).
  - 5 A group of activists centred at Toronto’s York University launched Project Threadbare (a play on the name of the project, suggesting that the operation lacked substance) to lobby and advocate for the detainees in the Canadian public sphere.
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