

E-terror: computer viruses, class and transnationalism in *Transmission and One Night @ the Call Center*

Liam Connell

[Author's institution]

[Abstract]

Bodyshopping Globalization, Labour, Offshoring,

The starting point for this essay is the description of the character Arjun Mehta as a terrorist in Hari Kunzru's 2005 novel *Transmission*. Mehta, an emigrated Indian computer programmer, unleashes a series of computer viruses onto the global communications network from his work place in Washington State in an attempt to reverse the decision, by the US-based computer-security company Virugenix, to terminate his employment. The effects of his viruses prove to be catastrophic, causing "an informational disaster, a holocaust of bits" in which the "major networks [...] dealing with such things as mobile telephony, airline reservations, transatlantic email traffic and automated-teller machines" collapse (Kunzru 272). As a consequence Mehta is quickly labelled a terrorist by the media and international law-enforcement agencies (159). The distance between Mehta's intent and the official designation of his actions are interesting for a number of reasons. First, the use of the terminology of terror is revealing about the way that the language of terrorism has been applied to a widening range of activities which might not have colloquially been understood as terrorism in the recent past. Second, the use of this language offers us the possibility that his actions *are* terrorist activities and ask us to think again about terrorism as something that is potentially sympathetic despite the contemporary discourses that attach to it. In reading the novel through this language of terror, a vocabulary that is incidental to much of the text, I aim to speculate about how this language relates to Mehta's status as a migrant worker within the particular transnational systems of contemporary labour exchange. The aim here is not to defend hacking *per se* so much as to suggest that the framing of hacking as terrorism is revealing about how the language of terror is utilized to defend the privileges and inequalities of existing international economic and power relations.

I start by reviewing the extended semantics of terrorism within contemporary legislative discourses of terrorism and consider how these have adapted historical associations between computer hacking, terrorism and foreignness. In looking at this longer history for the idea of e-terrorism, I detect a language of property and the resistance to ownership which, I suggest, can usefully be applied to Mehta's actions in *Transmission*. Taking this as a starting point I try to root his actions within the economic relationships between disenfranchized Indian workers and economically-powerful nations such as the US. I conclude the essay by looking at how similar narratives to those in *Transmission* were also being voiced by Chetan Bhagat in his novel, *One Night @ the Call Center*, also published in 2005. In looking at Bhagat's novel I suggest that the idea of terrorism takes on more striking ambivalence which is similarly rooted in the economic relations between India and American economic dominance. In his text, terrorism appears as something that is to be feared but also as something that can paradoxically be claimed. In tracing the roots of this double engagement with terror, I suggest that it grows out of a similar ambivalence towards US direct investment in India which appears, paradoxically, as a conduit leading India into contemporary global modernity but also as a resented curb on Indian economic power.

Transmission and the discourses of terror

One characteristic of the so-called "war on terror" has been the proliferation of theatres in which such a war may be fought. If the hot wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have understandably attracted the most attention, the culture of anxiety that attended the threat of terrorist-acts has seen governments extend their powers into numerous aspects of civil society in an attempt to survey and police the activities of purported terrorists. Under the leadership of President Bush, the United States administration brought forward its now infamous, PATRIOT Act (2001), which channelled extensive resources to the securitization of the US under the auspices of fighting terrorism. Similarly, in 2004, the administration significantly increased its funding to the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network "to support the nation's fight against terrorism and financial crimes"; this money was intended to increase the number of analysts monitoring the financial industry, to assist the access of this surveillance by law-enforcement agencies and to facilitate the extension of anti-money laundering programs to new areas of the financial services industry (US Department of the

Treasury). Likewise, the 2005 *Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act* authorized the construction of a “physical infrastructure” to prevent unlawful entry into the United States from Mexico. One aspect of the intensified securitization of the state under such legislation has been the increased monitoring of electronic communications media; an element which has been hotly debated in scholarly and public domain (Nelson; Ebenger).

The justification for the increased scrutiny of electronic communications has been two-fold. On the one hand such technologies offer the possibilities for effective communication and, potentially, allow groups intent on terrorism to more easily coordinate their activities. Alternatively, these technologies could become the very site of terrorism itself. As a consequence of a growing dependence upon information technologies, a co-ordinated attack on the networks that sustain them can become a way of launching terrorist attacks from remote locations. The internet’s potential for immediate communication becomes a double site of menace where its singular feature, the apparent ability of its technologies to erode distance, leaves western economies vulnerable to attack from without. In this sense the technology which is often regarded as the very quintessence of globalization comes to be associated with the threat of otherness as it is transformed into a conduit for an attack on the very institutions of globalization as neoliberalism. To this end they could be regarded as a mirror of the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001 which projected itself as the aggressive assertion of virulent capitalism but also, as result of its very prominence, the vulnerability of such a structure (Baudrillard 405).

As an expression of anxieties about the susceptibility of informational technologies, the recent popularity of the term cyber-jihad in the US encapsulates many of its central features; in particular, it yokes the supposedly ultramodern to the supposedly atavistic and attaches an implied foreignness to activities such as computer hacking. This is entirely evident in Robert Spencer’s blog on the right-wing website *Jihad Watch* (an organ of the David Horowitz Freedom Center and run by Spencer, a prominent anti-Islamic propagandist in the United States). In 2005 Spencer speculated whether the arrest of hackers in Morocco and Turkey for infecting computers in the US was evidence of a Cyber jihad (R. Spencer). The blog entry attracted few postings but those readers who did respond depicted Muslims as “incapable of developing anything on their own other than bombs and terror”; called for restrictions on the export of technology and education to “hostile countries”; and

articulated generalized fears about the openness of communicative technologies, “the vulnerability of the World Wide Web” and the overdependence of “developed nations” on the “Internet [...] to transmit information, transact business and to control vital infrastructure elements”.

If the obvious attempt to ethnicize terror on this website is chorused by its readers who associate various negative activities with Muslims in general this may simply be a mirror of the wider cultural link between terrorism and Islam since 2001. However, if such views have become axiomatic, this characterization of hacking is certainly not wholly new. Terrorism has been one of the associations that has historically attached itself to hacking and this has often combined with ideas of international networks and, more diffusely, of foreignness (Taylor *Crime in the Digital Sublime* 10). This is neatly encapsulated in the vaguely-cultish, and somewhat risible, expression of hacking culture, Iain Softley’s film *Hackers* (1995).¹ In Softley’s film, the connection between hacking and terrorism is explicitly made by Secret Service Agent, Richard Gill, who opines that:

Hackers penetrate and ravage delicate private and publicly-owned computer systems infecting them with viruses and stealing materials for their own ends. These people they’re, they’re terrorists. (Softley)

If Gill’s conjoining of hacking and terror resembles the current expansion of the language of terrorism, it differs from the recent discourses around the concept in certain respects. Most notably, Gill’s characterization of hacking lacks a sense of the hacker’s motivation and certainly implies no overt connection between the act of terror and any ideological purpose that might drive it. Such a condition is important to the recent legal codification of terrorism so its absence is notable from Softley’s account. If we are to infer an ideological purpose behind hacking from Softley’s film, we might look to Gill’s framing of the terror of hacking in terms of its threat to the sanctity of property rights. In these terms, we can see hacking as an attack against such rights in favour of an idea of collective entitlement framed through a notion of freedom of information. Though it is possible to read such an aspiration in entirely libertarian terms, elsewhere in the film, Softley’s characters use a loosely adapted Marxist vocabulary to suggest a more class-based reading. For instance, the apparently clownish celebrity hackers, Razor and Blade, echo the *Communist*

Manifesto's call to class-consciousness through the slogan "hackers of the world unite". Such a slogan, and the equally internationalist "hack the world", offers the possibility of the hacker as a kind of post-Fordist anarcho-communist committed to the belief that all property is theft. At the film's climax the internationalization of these slogans is literalized when an "army of hackers" are enlisted to help launch a co-ordinated assault upon the security of the transnational corporation Ellingson Mineral and to expose a plot to blame hackers for the embezzlement of the company's finances. Importantly, the cosmopolitan affiliations of the hackers, here, receive a broadly positive representation in comparison to agent Gill.

In relation to the present paper, I am interested in the connection that *Hackers* makes between terror and the politics of rights as is implied by its staging of a conflict between corporate interests and the rhetoric of freedom. Arguably, the broad sympathy that this rhetoric receives exposes the way that the language of terror is used to mask more complex questions about ownership and power. Crudely, I want to suggest that by persistently undermining agent Gill as the mouthpiece for the term "terror", especially by showing his assumptions about the role of hackers and the role of corporate executives to be misplaced dogma, Softley's text implicitly critiques the wide application of the language of terror. In making this claim, I want to argue that the use of this terminology in Softley's text serves to turn our attention to political questions that are subsumed by official attempts to frame resistance to corporate uses of modern communicative technologies as terrorism. From this reading I hope to show how Kunzru's novel makes a similar manoeuvre by portraying its "terrorist" as an exploited labourer within a global system of labour exchange.

If anything, Kunzru's critique of the excessive language of terrorism is more explicit than the rather tacit critique offered by Softley's text. Much of the novel's comedy is derived from a humorous mimicry of various kinds of jargon, most prominently in the representation of public-relations guru Guy Swift whose use of a marketing idiom unwittingly reveals the vacuity of the PR industry. A significant example of this technique is employed when presenting the words of a White House official in response to early reports of the effects of Mehta's Leela virus. Here a presidential spokesperson responds to the question of whether "the country was under attack" by arguing that:

any attempt to compromise or mitigate our ability to function effectively in terms of our critical infrastructure, whether that be in the realm of telecommunications, energy, banking and finance, water facilitation, government operational activity thresholds or services, must be viewed as taking place within a framework strongly suggestive of deliberate negativization, threat or hostile intent. (Kunzru 154)

The conceptual breadth of the definition of an attack in this response may be intended as parodic, with words such as “negativization” representing an ironic imitation of the jargon of administrative bureaucracy. Nevertheless, the definition is revealing about the way that the terminology of terror has bled from more overt acts of violence to include more general acts of protest against the organization of government or of industry. It would certainly be possible to see actions such as a strike by the trades union, Communication Workers of America, being construed as a “threat or hostile intent” under so loose a definition, because it might compromise the effective operation of the country’s communications infrastructure. Likewise, protests such as that of Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow-Push coalition, outside the New York Stock exchange in September 2008, could be similarly cast as attacks on the nation because they hinder the functioning of the “banking and finance” industries. It is revealing, too, that in the breadth of its definition Kunzru’s parody closely resembles the official discourses of terror which similarly define the idea with a broad brush.

Infamously, former President Bush declared that “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” in his 2001 address to Congress (Bush). The stark opposition between consent and terrorism is subtly implied by Kunzru, whose White House official insists upon an image of the nation as integrated by a common interest or purpose. Yet Bush’s crude war-time rhetoric finds parallel in the, theoretically, more measured language of legislation which has similarly sought to define terrorism in potentially sweeping ways. For instance, in the introduction to the UK Terrorism Act 2000, the concept of terrorism is interpreted fairly widely. For instance in section 1 c terrorism is defined as “the use or threat of action where [...] the use or threat is made for the purpose of advancing a political, religious or ideological cause”. Like the parody of government-speak in Kunzru’s novel, substantial numbers of legitimate activities might easily fall under such a definition, especially as the idea of relevant actions is also set out in general terms. Would a strike by ambulance drivers be

construed as terrorism because their industrial action “creates a serious risk to the health or safety of the public or a section of the public” for the purpose of advancing a political cause? At a certain level such suggestions are undoubtedly frivolous but, as Kunzru’s novel appears to point out, the new lexicon of terrorism allows for its misapplication to the actions of all those who act against the structures of organized capitalism. In this context, it is notable that the Terrorism Act 2000 has been interpreted by legal advisors as being the first piece of UK legislation to make “the threat or use of computer hacking a potential act of terrorism.” (OUT-LAW News)

If *Transmission* appears to suggest that the term terrorist is easily misapplied within the context of a loosely defined semantics of terror, it also suggests a context for Mehta’s actions which implicates the systems of contemporary capitalism. Within the novel, though not in any fully realized way, Mehta stands as the model of labour practices commonly known as body-shopping: where firms obtain US visas for Indian IT workers in order to hire them out to companies based in the US. The practice of body-shopping complements the more widely known practice of call-centre offshoring by moving workers from low-income to high-income economies while reducing the costs of employment to the firms who utilize their labour. A. Aneesh has compared this practice to “just-in-time [...] inventory management” arguing that:

Just like a large inventory, a large, permanent workforce maintained with no regard to the seasonal highs and lows of a business is a costly problem which the practice of body-shopping attempts to overcome in its own way. By programming the supply of software professionals accurately and only for the length of time needed, body-shopping firms help various companies to reduce this cost. (Aneesh 46)

As the term body-shopping suggests, the practice is plainly objectifying, reducing workers to components in the production cycle with little regard for their welfare. The migrated IT workers are often comparatively low paid, and enjoy little job security and a precarious entitlement to remain in the US. In a formula that closely resembles Mehta’s trajectory in Kunzru’s novel, Aneesh points out that body-shopping firms recruit in India using a fantasy of American life, a fantasy which gradually fades when confronted with the realities of life in the US (Aneesh 52-54). The resemblance of Mehta’s experiences in *Transmission* to Aneesh’s

anthropological work suggest that Kunzru is well aware of the implications of such a system, and its systematic exploitation of Indian workers could be regarded as the heart of the story concerning Arjun Mehta. Seduced by Sunny Srinivasan, the embodiment of Non-Resident-Indian (NRI) affluence (“less a human being than a medium, a channel for the transmission of consumer lifestyle messages”, Kunzru 8) Arjun is employed to work for Databodies in the US and is flown to California where he must interview for a position in a US firm. The terms of this arrangement in the US are considerably less promising than advertised and we are introduced to him walking beside a freeway, one of either the “poor, foreign [or] mentally ill”. Having been lodged in group accommodation by Databodies, Mehta finds that he has no guaranteed employment yet is required to pay for his lodgings and the cost of acquiring his visa and airfare from India before he can return home. He is also unable to seek alternate employment because his entitlement to work in the US is guaranteed by Databodies rather than his own abilities as a programmer.

Stories of such circumstances are commonly related to trafficked or illegalized migrants, especially to workers in the sex industries. So, to see them described in connection with seemingly high-status work such as computer programming is perhaps surprising. Nevertheless, Kunzru seems clear about the historical significance that we should attach to these practices and this can be detected in the evocative language that he uses for this situation. At one point, describing the disdain with which the Databodies American supervisor regards her Indian employees, one of the bodyshopped workers complains that “she sees us as a bunch of starving coolies” (Kunzru 44). Later in the novel, one of Mehta’s colleagues at Virugenix uses the phrase “slave visas” (65) but, while this image clearly has substantial force, the image of the coolie seems to more accurately connect these contemporary labour practices to the system of Indian indentured labour that operated during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. An important element of the Indian experience of indenture was the failure of the promised affluent return (see Mishra) and a similar failure haunts Mehta who constructs elaborate fantasies about his successful employment for his parents and who dreads the prospect of unemployment and an ignoble homecoming. Notably, for the argument that I am trying to make here, his act of “terrorism” is perpetrated at the point that this threat is realized.

Such claims are clearly complicated. Despite his disillusionment with his employment and the fantasy of American prosperity, the novel is careful to record

Mehta's continuing sympathies with consumer capitalism by labelling him a "Gap loyalty-card holder and habitué of Seattle Niketown" (Kunrzu 288). This sympathy for consumerism is further emphasized by his residual commitment to an American fantasy life so that he self-justifies his unleashing of the Leela virus by explaining that all he "wanted was [his] job back [...] was to work and be happy and live a life in magic America" (158-59). With this in mind it is clear that Mehta does not conform to the idea of what Paul A. Taylor has called a "hacktivist". Taylor defines hacktivism as "the combination of hacking techniques with political activism" and such a definition seems pointedly at odds with Mehta's naive faith that his ability to thwart his own virus would result in his continued employment. However Taylor also goes on to identify hacktivism as a response to the failure of hacking's "radical potential" and suggests that it is focused "upon the political nature of the end to which technological means should be put" (Taylor "From Hackers to Hacktivists" 626). If Mehta is no radical, and if he lacks a programmatic sense of political activism, his actions might still be construed as offering a challenge to the ends of computer technologies as they are utilized within an employment market that extends transnationally between high and low-income economies. Arguably, however unformulated this opposition may be, Mehta is opposed to the use that consumer capitalism makes of southern labour as expendable, short-term and poorly paid.

In this context I want to borrow a reading from an essay by Nicholas Spencer on William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's *The Difference Engine* (Gibson and Sterling), in order to argue that Mehta's actions can be read as a kind of Luddite détournement. Following Thomas Pynchon's 1984 essay, "Is It OK to Be a Luddite?" (Pynchon), Spencer reads Luddism as an attack on the *technique* not the *technology* of advanced capitalism (N. Spencer 406). This perhaps recalls Taylor's view of hacktivism and seems to accurately encapsulate Mehta's relationship to the computer technologies that he eventually disrupts: the novel suggests that he regards computers as "mystical" (Kunrzu 106) and his assault on these technologies is patently motivated by the techniques of their utilization as a mechanism of contemporary employment. Furthermore, Pynchon's recuperation of Luddism rests partly on his interest in the transformation of Ned Lud into King Ludd, a transformation which allowed him to embody a range of contemporary disagreements with the forms of capital. Or, as Spencer puts it, the transformation of King Ludd from "a documented historical person" into "a mythic entity" allows him to represent "the resistance to the

incorporation of technology within the disciplined factory” (N. Spencer 407). This notion similarly seems to chime with the presentation of Mehta in the novel when he is transformed from an historical person into a symbolic register. This is perhaps most obvious in the accounts of the co-option of Mehta’s name by a range of groups in the second section of the novel “Noise”. In this explanation of how the aftermath of the Leela viruses were experienced, Kunzru describes how a group of Italian autonomist radicals adopted his name and “invited anyone else who wished to use it to do the same”. This injunction was clearly successful since:

In recent times “Arjun Mehta” has authored statements on the food industry and the World Trade Organization. His Virugenix employee ID photo [...] has been screen-printed on to t-shirts with humorous anti-capitalist slogans. Arjun Mehta [...] is rapidly changing shape. (Kunzru 287-88)

Descriptions such as this suggest that Mehta becomes the “mythic” focus for a slew of disparate political grievances. While his initial attack lacked the ideological coherence that it subsequently attracts, this very absence allows for its co-option by a range of political positions as he becomes the symbol for more fully articulated rejections of capitalism.

Yet *Transmission* is ambivalent about the significance of this Luddite recuperation of Mehta’s terrorist act. Notably, despite his adoption as an icon of anti-capitalism, the conclusion to the novel also hints that his viruses represented “a revolution in code” which can be redeployed in the service of the very capitalist structures that they initially undermined (Kunzru 287). The use of revolution here sees the word stripped of any political efficacy and turned into a symbol of innovation. As such it suggests that Mehta’s attack on the systems of capitalism allows one further co-option, becoming the very thing that capitalism has sought to claim as its own: innovation, entrepreneurialism and development. Yet this need not indicate the failure of Pynchonian Luddism as a strategy for resistance. To suggest otherwise, I turn again to Spencer’s reading of *The Difference Engine* in which he suggests that the Luddites of this novel employ the Situationist strategy of *détournement* in order to disrupt the coherence of authoritarian meaning by rendering its language into a textual babble that is contained within its pre-existing textual structures (N. Spencer 415). The examples in *The Difference Engine* are the advertising Bills distributed by Captain

Swing (a counterpart, or pseudonym for General Ludd). Yet this same idea might easily be applied to the effect of the Leela virus as it transforms the computer code into meaningless or incoherent versions of itself.

Much of the destruction that the Leela virus causes is produced by its reuse of existing elements of code to create entirely new messages, and particularly messages which oppose the original purpose of the code. This is not unlike the Situationist International's definition of "Détournement" as "the reuse of preexisting artistic elements in a new ensemble" (SI 1959). The presentation of this effect in the novel is highly significant given Mehta's plight, because it focuses upon the practices of border policing within the European Union.

The "shuffling" action of *Leela08*, which randomly reassociates database attributes, was responsible for the destruction of a huge number of EU immigration records before it was finally spotted and the system closed down [...] The same infection in machines hosting the Eurodac fingerprint database produced a number of false positives, identifying innocent people as known criminals, failed asylum seekers or persons being monitored by European intelligence services. Combinations of the two types of infection led (at a conservative estimate) to some thirty mistaken deportations. Since Operation Atomium relied almost entirely on two [...] strengths – [...] *the fast identification of deportation candidates* [...] and [...] *special powers to accelerate processing of deportation candidates* – it led to a situation in which (among other abuses) people were plucked from their homes at night and deposited into some of the world's more troubled places without so much as a change of clothes. (Kunzru 283)

These events seem especially apposite when we consider the motivations that led Mehta to release the virus. Had it worked uninterrupted, the EU's crack down on illegalized migrants sought to use a suspension of normal judicial process in order to deport undocumented workers to "the world's more troubled places". The Leela virus retains the structures of this operation but transposes the identities of the illegalized migrant and the legal citizen. Mehta's virus, launched in an attempt to prevent his own disgraced return to India, works to destabilize the privileges of first-world citizenship by reconfiguring the instruments of authoritarian surveillance. The account

of the unceremonious deportation as one of a number of “abuses” is laced with irony, since it is regarded as an abuse only because its object is mistakenly identified. Implicitly, this account suggests that no similar concern would be extended to the operation’s intended victims. This is offered further irony by the fact that one of those mistakenly deported is the PR guru, Guy Swift, who is employed by the EU to brand its coordinated border agency through the notion of privilege and exclusivity, depicting the EU as a fashionable nightclub in which only the “in-crowd” are admitted (252-53).

In reading Mehta’s actions in *Transmission* as Luddite détournement, I want to propose ways of understanding their designation as terrorism through the perspective of radical opposition which is directed towards the systems that contemporary technology serves. In doing so, I am also trying to rethink the persistent characterization of hacking as international or foreign. Unwittingly, perhaps, Mehta’s “terrorism” manages to transform the structures of inequality that data is used to support by rendering the distinctions between subjects that inhabit opposite ends of an international order of labour relations unreadable. Inferring an ideological revolt against inequalities that are rooted in his subjective personal experience of flexible employment, we find that Mehta’s viruses result in an attack that chimes with his own anxieties and hardships, however inadvertently.

Terrorism and Indian nationalism in *One Night @ the Call Center*

Taking this suggestion that *Transmission* narrates the use of terror to challenge the lines of privilege between high-income and low-income economies as my starting point, I want to turn to Chetan Bhagat’s highly successful English-language Indian novel, *One Night @ the Call Center* to consider another fictional representation of e-terror that is more actively focused upon India’s economic relation to the US.² Published in the same year as Kunzru’s novel but marketed solely for the Indian English-language market, with little attempt to penetrate the English-language markets in Britain or the US, *One Night @ the Call Center* deals with similar concerns but in a more overtly propagandist fashion, that both echoes and critiques the rhetoric of the India Shining campaign. Set predominantly in an Indian call centre in Gurgaon, a satellite of Delhi known for its concentration of multinational call centres, the novel traces a group of six call-centre agents over the period of one night.

The climax of the novel is a near-death experience in which God intervenes to save the six from certain death on condition that:

You close your eyes for three minutes. Think about what you really want and what you need to change in your life to get it. Then, once you get out of here, *act* on those changes. (Bhagat 228)

If God sounds a little like a motivational speaker in the above quotation, this resemblance is enhanced when God outlines the “four things a person **needs** for success”: “a medium amount of intelligence”; “a bit of imagination”; “self-confidence” and the experience of failure (232-33). God uses this theological self-help guide to persuade the central characters to make positive changes to their personal life, in the case of the two more mature characters, Radhika and Military Uncle; to become self-employed entrepreneurs, in the case of the two young men, Shyam and Vroom; or, in the case of the two young women, to follow socially useful career paths such as teaching (**Priyanka**) or charity work (Esha). These outcomes only partly depend on them leaving their current positions as call-centre agents, positions which are persistently represented as benefiting US corporations rather than the greater Indian economy. The young men must obviously resign, while **Priyanka** needs to continue working only long enough to afford to retrain. For Radhika, as the wife of an adulterous husband with an abusive mother-in-law, the call centre affords the economic independence which allows her to fight for divorce. In her case, the call centre seems to offer the promise of a kind of individualized, liberal gender-equality that endorses the view of a modern globalized economy as enabling certain universal rights. Such a representation seems important to Bhagat (an author who was still an investment banker at the time of writing the novel) in order to balance the more hostile representation of call centres by acknowledging the individual benefits of employment for India’s young cybertariat.³ This sense of balance plays a key role in the novel since, before the six protagonists can fulfil their potential, they must save the jobs of their fellow agents by generating a massive increase in call numbers which will convince their US owners to postpone job cuts while the call centre seeks to develop new income streams. The justification for this outcome is presumably to demonstrate the protagonists’ charisma and acumen but also to demonstrate their concern for those “agents with kids, families and responsibilities in life” (250).

The saving of the call centre is achieved by convincing US customers of Western Computers, the firm that outsources its support to the Indian call centre, that terrorists have attacked the US with a computer virus that will wreak untold havoc upon the US economy. Customers are persuaded of this fact by being encouraged to activate an inbuilt testing script within *Microsoft Word* which results in the software generating pages of text. They are then encouraged to repeatedly call the helpline as a means of notifying the authorities about the progress of the virus. The treatment of terrorism in this text is interesting both in its relation to nationalism and to the idea of work. At one point it is suggested that the call centre's location in India is an asset to the US because "India has faced terrorism for years" (256). The invocation of India's history of terrorism may align the notion of terror with Islam in ways that map onto the new discourses of terrorism following the attacks on New York and which were clearly exploited by Indian politicians in the years since 2001 (Rai and Simon; Brown). However, in contrast to this use of terrorism in the South Asian context, the language of the text implicitly moves the designation of terrorist onto the call-centre workers themselves as the idea of terror resurfaces in relation to their calls to US customers. Once the plan has been put into action the protagonists become busy "scaring Americans out of their wits" (Bhagat 261). Even more pointedly, the narrator, Shyam, explains that he "made a few calls and terrorized a few more Americans" (266). This shift is clearly a subtle one **whereas** the writing in the novel is frequently unsubtle in its attempt to represent a hip Indian youth-speak. Nevertheless, in terms of how the language of terror is employed, the novel appears to turn the Indian worker into a terrorist through only a slight alteration in their normal patterns of work. The routine labour of cold-call sales-drives becomes a terrorist act by playing on the fears of terrorism and the exorbitant culture of risk. This is nicely handled when Vroom, the architect of the plan, emails all the call-centre workers a script that they should employ when talking to their US customers (255-57). Though undoubtedly ironic in its tone, the humour of this passage undoubtedly depends upon the fact that scripts similar to this structure the kinds of customer-employee interactions in the highly rationalized world of customer service.

The language of terror plays only a small part in Bhagat's novel but it does prompt questions about how this should be interpreted, especially given the fact that, like Mehta, the terrorists here are Indian workers seeking to resist the decision of US employers to terminate their employment. Where Bhagat's text differs from Kunzru's

novel, however, is in the explicit evocation of Indian nationalism that it attaches to questions of the relationship between India and the US. For instance, when instructing his fellow agents about how to save their jobs, Vroom compares the modern call-centre agents to their predecessors of “two generations ago” who “got this country free” (253). This is complicated, in part because this evocation contains an implied criticism of the work of the call centre, which Vroom (possibly ventriloquizing Bhagat) describes frequently as the lost generation (207-08, 253). In contrast, Kunzru’s treatment of this question is typically ironic. Though Mehta’s employer in India, Mr Khan, complains that his decision to leave for work in the US is a betrayal of the country that provided his education, this claim is afforded little credibility in the novel because of the comic treatment that Kunzru gives Mr Khan’s export industry, the sullen indifference of Mehta to such arguments and the somewhat hysterical list of nationalist stereotypes that Mr Khan employs (Kunzru 23).

The expression of Indian nationalism is given even greater prominence in *One Night @ the Call Center* because it is metaphorically connected to the central love interest in the novel, the narrative of Shyam’s relationship with Priyanka. As a former couple, the chances of reconciliation are apparently imperilled by her impending marriage to the NRI Ganesh, a Lexus-driving Microsoft employee in the US. Over the course of the novel, however, this relationship becomes a metonym for the relationship between Indian entrepreneurialism and the Indian economy, with India’s marriage to foreign capital playing the role of the dishonest NRI. This extended imagery culminates in the mistaken identification of Microsoft’s in-program testing code as a “bug” which proves that “nothing is perfect”, even *Microsoft Word* (Bhagat 257). Shortly after, Ganesh is likewise shown to have feet of clay, when it is revealed that the photograph which he has been using to secure a bride has been touched up, with an unflattering bald spot removed. The idea that Ganesh stands as a fantasy of the US obviously recalls Sunny Srinivasan in *Transmission*, but what is interesting about it is, in part, the role that this fantasy plays in shaping the structure of the Indian economy within India itself.

Bhagat persistently draws parallels between US behaviour and the behaviour of India’s governmental and managerial elites. The plan to exploit a fictitious terrorist attack, for instance, is prompted by an insight into American fearfulness and paranoia, which itself builds out of a sustained disparagement of a US culture of consumerism and of the practices of the US overseas both militarily *and* economically. However,

while watching CNN reports of the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq, Vroom likens US American military action to the behaviour of the call-centre manager, Bakshi, and describes “the whole world [...] being run by a bad stupid-evil boss” (208). Likewise, US overseas-investments and employment practices are represented as demeaning and inequitable, so that Vroom also complains about the US tossing “their loose change” at Indian workers (228) and decrying the fact that:

“We get paid well, fifteen thousand a month. Fuck, that is almost twelve dollars a day. Wow, I make as much a day as a US burger boy makes in two hours. Not bad for my college degree. Not bad at all. Fucking nearly double what I made as a journalist anyway.” (103)

Again, we can see a degree of ambivalence here. The complaint about the relative levels of pay between Indian call-centre agents and US burger boys seems a clear indictment of Vroom’s US employers. Yet, the fact that this doubles his previous income as a journalist seems also to indict his Indian **employer** who similarly does not adequately remunerate its employees.

Of the six call-centre agents it is Vroom who is most vocally anti-American but he is also represented as a crusader: someone who lost his job as a journalist for attacking Indian political corruption (49). In this role it is possible to reflect that his utilization of terrorism has a broader political function. It is not simply a device to save a few Indian jobs in a single call centre; it is a method to achieve greater reform that will promote Indian expertise and innovation for its own national purposes. If there is something slightly smug about the conclusion to *One Night @ the Call Center*, which ignores fundamental intra-national inequalities of class due to its faith in the liberalizing potential of modern capitalism, its use of terror remains interesting because it turns contemporary discourses of terrorism onto the very structures of international capitalism that they appear to serve. The novel’s linking of America’s war in Iraq to US outsourcing suggests that both practices fulfil the same ends; that the “War on Terror” is a war of economy just as much as a war of security. Within a transnational labour-economy, the representation of the Indian worker as terrorist in both novels may draw our attention to the fact that this is also a war of class.

Notes

¹ Softley's film has been widely criticised within the hacking community for its misrepresentation of their activities (Taylor *Crime in the Digital Sublime* 11).

² Bhagat is reportedly the best-selling English-language author in India and *One Night @ the Call Center* sold over 1,000,000 copies (Sampath).

³ The term cybertariat is coined by Ursula Huws to refer to the standardized conditions of labour for IT workers within an international economy. Interestingly she speculates that the forms of resistance that such workers may resort to are likely to be "sporadic and anarchic forms, such as the writing of viruses or other forms of sabotage" (Huws 20). Both *Transmission* and *One Night @ the Call Center* appear to share this view.

Notes on Contributor

Works Cited

- Aneesh, A. *Virtual Migration: The Programming of Globalization*. Durham, NC and London: Duke UP, 2006.
- Baudrillard, Jean. "L'esprit Du Terrorisme." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101.2 (2002): 403-15.
- Bhagat, Chetan. *One Night @ the Call Center*. New Delhi: Rupa, 2005.
- Brown, Derek. "What the Indian Papers Say: India May Have Been One of the First Countries to Join George Bush's Anti-Terrorism Coalition, but Its Press Displays a Wide Range of Dissenting Voices." *guardian.co.uk*. 20 Nov. 2001. Web. 26 Jan. 2010. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/nov/20/kashmir.india>>.
- Bush, President George W. "Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People." 2001. 26 Jan. 2010. <<http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>>.
- Ebenger, Tina. "The USA Patriot Act: Implications for Private E-Mail." *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 4.4 (2008): 47-64.
- Gibson, William, and Bruce Sterling. *The Difference Engine*. London: VGSF, 1991.
- Huws, Ursula. "The Making of a Cybertariat? Virtual Work in a Real World." *Socialist Register 2001*. Ed. Leo Panitch and Colin Leys. London: Merlin, 2000. 1-23.
- Kunzru, Hari. *Transmission*. London: Penguin, 2005.

-
- Mishra, Vijay. *The Literature of Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*. London and New York: Routledge, 2007.
- Nelson, Lisa. "Protecting the Common Good: Technology, Objectivity, and Privacy." *Public Administration Review* 62 (2002): 69-73.
- OUT-LAW News. "UK Law Makes Hacking an Act of Terrorism | Pinsent Masons Llp." 2001. 27 Jan. 2010. <<http://www.out-law.com/page-1409>>.
- Pynchon, Thomas. "Is It O.K. To Be a Luddite?" *The New York Times Book Review* 28 Oct. 1984, pp. 1, 40-41. 1984. The Modern World. <http://www.themodernword.com/pynchon/pynchon_essays_luddite.html>.
- Rai, Vinay, and William L. Simon. *Think India: The Rise of the World's Next Superpower and What It Means for Every American*. New York: Dutton, 2007.
- Sampath, G. "Author as Everyman." 2008. DNA India. 18 Jan. 2010. <http://www.dnaindia.com/lifestyle/books-and-more_author-as-everyman_1164965>.
- SI 1959. "The Situationist International Text Library: Détournement as Negation and Prelude." 1959. 10 Nov. 2007. <<http://library.nothingness.org/articles/all/all/display/315>>.
- Hackers. 1995. Iain Softley, MGM.**
- Spencer, N. "Rethinking Ambivalence: Technopolitics and the Luddites in William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's *the Difference Engine*." *Contemporary Literature* 40.3 (1999): 403-29.
- Spencer, Robert. "Cyber Jihad?" 29 Aug. 2005. 1 Nov. 2007. <<http://www.jihadwatch.org/2005/08/cyber-jihad.html>>.
- Taylor, Paul A. "From Hackers to Hacktivists: Speed Bumps on the Global Superhighway?" *New Media and Society* 7.5 (2005): 625-46.
- . *Hackers: Crime in the Digital Sublime*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- U.S. Department of the Treasury. "Bush Administration Announces Budget Increase to Help Fight Terrorist Financing and Financial Crime." 2004. 19 Jan. 2010. <<http://www.ustreas.gov/press/releases/js1100.htm>>.

liam.connell@winchester.ac.uk