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Terrorism and the Politics of Fear

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This article examines how news reports about terrorism in five nationally prominent U.S. newspapers reflect the terms and discourse associated with the politics of fear, or decision makers' promotion and use of audience beliefs and assumptions about danger, risk, and fear, to achieve certain goals. Qualitative data analysis of the prevalence and meaning of the words *fear*, *victim*, *terrorism*, and *crime* 18 months before and after the attacks of September 11, 2001, shows that terrorism and crime are now linked very closely with the expanding use of fear, there was a dramatic increase in linking terrorism to fear, coverage of crime and fear persisted but at a very low rate, and there was a large increase in news reports linking terrorism to victim. The implications for the social constructionist approach to social problems and social control are discussed.

Keywords: *terrorism; propaganda; fear; mass media; social control; qualitative media analysis*

"Al Qaeda is to terror what the Mafia is to crime."

George W. Bush

"If we make the wrong choice, the danger is that we will get hit again, that we'll be hit in a way that is devastating."

Dick Cheney

"He has conviction. . . . He's taking the fight to the terrorists. . . . I love my kids. I want my kids to be safe."

undecided voter "leaning" toward Bush

George W. Bush's reelection in 2004 was preordained when his handlers were able to convince true believers (Hoffer, 1951) that citizens killed in the 9/11 attacks were victims of Al-Qaeda-aided-by-Iraq-that-had-weapons-of-mass-destruction. Many Americans—and the majority of Bush supporters—continued to believe that Iraq was involved in the 9/11 hijackings and was prepared to use stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction against the United States

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despite incontrovertible evidence to the contrary (Kull, 2004; Kull, Ramsay, & Lewis, 2002). It was not evidence that drove Bush supporters; it was emotions consonant with the mass-mediated politics of fear nurtured by decades of crime control efforts. The architect of the 9/11 attacks, Osama Bin Laden, remains free (at this writing), whereas an estimated 15,000 to 100,000 Iraqis, mostly women and children, have been killed (BBC, 2004). As Vice President Cheney's comment (above) indicates, the Bush campaign celebrated the victims of 9/11 and warned that more U.S. citizens would die if the Iraq War did not continue. Fear has great political utility in joining terrorism with nonconformity, deviance, and crime as a threat (Hornqvist, 2004). The politics of fear has transformed terrorism as a tactic to terrorism as a world condition, and now, as Giroux (2003) suggests, "the rhetoric of terrorism is important because it operates on many registers to both address and inflict human misery" (p. 5).

This article examines these events as products of the politics of fear, or decision makers' promotion and use of audience beliefs and assumptions about danger, risk, and fear, to achieve certain goals. The particular focus is on how fear as a topic was presented in news reports about terrorism and victimization and, more generally, how news reports about terrorism in five nationally prominent newspapers reflect the terms and discourse associated with the politics of fear. I wish to examine the conceptual and empirical support for the politics of fear thesis, which may be stated as follows: The terms *crime*, *victim*, and *fear* are joined with news reports about terrorism to construct public discourse that reflects symbolic relationships about order, danger, and threat that may be exploited by political decision makers.

The news media's use of these terms is tied to a long-standing linkage of fear and victimization with crime and insecurity. As Hornqvist (2004) suggests, terrorism is constructed as an indication that law alone is not enough to provide security:

The law is being replaced by other steering mechanisms. Force is being implemented according to a new model. Interventions are taking place against undesirable behaviours that do not constitute crimes and on the basis of a different objective than ensuring that people act in accordance with the law. The security mentality has ruptured the law; or, more correctly, the law has been undermined from two directions, from above and below. It may seem absurd that a single area of policy should cover everything from truancy and drug sales to acts of terror. (p. 37)

Giroux (2003) and others have argued that governmental actions against terrorism are consistent with policies against youth and their problems that challenge the very assumptions on which law rests:

The greatest challenge Americans face does not come from crazed terrorists, but in the ongoing battle to expand and deepen the principles of justice, freedom, and equality on behalf of all citizens—especially young people, who are quickly becoming an abandoned generation. (p. xx)

Propaganda research shows that decision makers, who serve as key news sources, can shape perceptions of mass audiences and promote acquiescence to state control measures (Ellenius & European Science Foundation, 1998; Gerth, 1992; Jackall, 1994). The public information about the need for extraordinary measures to combat fear has been fueled by government and police officials, who serve as dominant news sources, and therefore are significant actors in defining problems and setting political agendas (Chiricos, Padgett, & Gertz, 2000; Kappeler, Blumberg, & Potter, 1999; Surette, 1998). An expansive use of the word *fear* in news reports has been documented (Altheide, 2002b; Altheide & Michalowski, 1999; Furedi, 1948-1997; Glassner, 1999). Indeed, the extensive use of fear to highlight crime news has produced a discourse of fear, which may be defined as the pervasive communication, symbolic awareness, and expectation that danger and risk are a central feature of the effective environment or the physical and symbolic environment as people define and experience it in everyday life. Journalistic accounts about terrorism reflect news organizations' reliance on official news sources to provide entertaining reports compatible with long-established symbols of fear, crime, and victimization about threats to individuals and the United States in the "fight against terrorism." I argue that tying terrorism coverage to an expansive discourse of fear has contributed to the emergence of the politics of fear or decision makers' promotion and use of audience beliefs and assumptions about danger, risk, and fear to achieve certain goals. This research tracks the results of these efforts 18 months after the September 11, 2001, attacks and compares this usage of fear with the 18 months prior to those attacks to describe shifts in public discourse about fear. An overview of the discourse of fear will be followed by an elaboration of the politics of fear and a discussion of the materials and content analysis of news reports. Data about the emerging politics of fear and how it is manifested in news coverage involving fear, victimization, terrorism, and crime will then be presented. A major point of this research is that news organizations' reliance on government officials as news sources promoted reports that joined fear to terrorism and victimization.

News and the Discourse of Fear

The common thread for most scholarly and popular analysis of fear in American society is crime and victimization. Social constructionist approaches to the study of social problems and emergent social movements stress how mass media accounts of crime, violence, and victimization are simplistic and often decontextualize rather complex events to reflect narratives that demonize and offer simplistic explanations (Best, 1995, 1999; Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1991; Fishman & Cavender, 1998; Johnson, 1995) that often involve state intervention while adding to the growing list of victims.

The discourse of fear has been constructed through news and popular culture accounts. The main focus of the discourse of fear in the United States for

the past 30 years or so has been crime. News reports about crime and fear have contributed to the approach taken by many social scientists in studying how crime is linked with fear. Numerous researchers link crime, the mass media, and fear (Chiricos, Eschholz, & Gertz, 1997; Ericson, 1995; Ferraro, 1995; C. A. Garland, 1997; Pearson, 1983; Shirlow & Pain, 2003). There is also an impressive literature on crime, victimization, and fear (Baer & Chambliss, 1997; Chiricos et al., 1997; Ferraro, 1995; Warr, 1987, 1990, 1992). Other researchers have examined the nature and consequences of fear in connection with crime but also in relationship to political symbols and theories of social control (Altheide, 2002b; Furedi, 1948-1997; C. A. Garland, 1997; Glassner, 1999; Massumi, 1993; Moehle & Levitt, 1991; Naphy & Roberts, 1997; Russell, 1998).

Crime and terrorism discourses are artfully produced. The most pervasive aspect of this "victim" perspective is crime. Giroux (2003) argues that a sense of urgency prevails such that time itself is speeded up, in what he refers to as "emergency time":

Emergency time defines community against its democratic possibilities, detaching it from those conditions that prepare citizens to deliberate collectively about the future and the role they must play in creating and shaping it. (p. 8)

Criminal victimization, including numerous crime myths (e.g., predators, stranger danger, random violence; Best, 1999) contributed to the cultural foundation of the politics of fear, particularly the belief that we were all actual or potential victims and needed to be protected from the source of fear—criminals or terrorists (D. Garland, 2001). Politicians and state control agencies, working with news media as "news sources," have done much to capitalize on this concern and to promote a sense of insecurity and reliance on formal agents of social control (FASCs)—and related businesses—to provide surveillance, protection, revenge, and punishment to protect us, to save us (Chiricos et al., 1997; Ericson et al., 1991; Surette, 1992). Hornqvist (2004) suggests that a security perspective overrules mere law, especially as numerous instances of deviance and violations are perceived to be threatening social order:

First, the central factor is not what acts an individual may have committed, but rather which group an individual may belong to. Is he a drug addict? Is she an activist? Refugee? Muslim? Arab? . . . Second, according to security logic, it is not the behaviour itself that is of interest, but rather what this might be perceived as indicating: does it mean that the individual constitutes a risk? . . . Finally, an intervention against an individual or group need not be preceded by any court determination. Instead, a decision made by an individual civil servant is sufficient. The intervention constitutes an administrative measure based on a general assessment of risk, with the question of guilt being only one of many factors weighed in the decision. (p. 39)

The mass media and popular culture are best conceived of as key elements of our symbolic environment rather than independent causes and effects. News does not merely set agendas (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Shaw & McCombs, 1977); rather, consistent with symbolic interaction theory, news that relies on certain symbols and promotes particular relationships between words, deeds, and issues also guides the perspectives, frameworks, language, and discourse that we use in relating to certain problems as well as related issues. My focus in this article is on news that guides discourse.

Social meanings are constructed through news reports by associating words with certain problems and issues. Repeated use of certain terms is linked to public discourse (Altheide & Michalowski, 1999; Beckett, 1996; Ekecrantz, 1998; Fowler, 1991; Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; van Dijk, 1988; Zhondang & Kosicki, 1993). Tracking the emergence of new “connections” during a period of time is one way to assess the process of the social construction of reality. Research documents how fear and crime have been joined. Crime and threats to the public order—and therefore, all good citizens—are part of the focus of fear, but the topics change throughout time. What they all have in common is pointing to the “Other,” the outsider, the nonmember, the alien. However, Schwalbe et al. (2000) has shown that “othering” is part of a social process whereby a dominant group defines into existence an inferior group. This requires the establishment and “group sense” of symbolic boundaries of membership. These boundaries occur through institutional processes that are grounded in everyday situations and encounters, including language, discourse, accounts, and conversation. Knowledge and skill at using “what everyone like us knows” involves formal and informal socialization so that members acquire the coinage of cultural capital with which they can purchase acceptance, allegiance, and belonging. Part of this language involves the discourse of fear:

Discourse is more than talk and writing; it is a way of talking and writing. To regulate discourse is to impose a set of formal or informal rules about what can be said, how it can be said, and who can say what to whom. . . . Inasmuch as language is the principal means by which we express, manage, and conjure emotions, to regulate discourse is to regulation [*sic*] emotion. The ultimate consequence is a regulation of action . . .

When a form of discourse is established as standard practice, it becomes a tool for reproducing inequality, because it can serve not only to regulate thought and emotion, but also to identify Others and thus to maintain boundaries as well. (Schwalbe et al., 2000, pp. 433-434)

Fear, crime, terrorism, and victimization are experienced and known vicariously through the mass media by audience members. Information technology, entertainment programming, and perspectives are incorporated into a media logic that is part of the everyday life of audience members. *Media logic* is defined

as a form of communication and the process through which media transmit and communicate information. Elements of this form include the distinctive features of each medium and the formats used by these media for the organization, the style in which it is presented, the focus or emphasis on particular characteristics of behavior, and the grammar of media communication (Altheide & Snow, 1979; Snow, 1983). This logic—or the rationale, emphasis, and orientation promoted by media production, processes, and messages—tends to be evocative, encapsulated, highly thematic, familiar to audiences, and easy to use.

News formats, or the way of selecting, organizing, and presenting information, shape audience assumptions and preferences for certain kinds of information. The mass media are important in shaping public agendas by influencing what people think about and how events and issues are packaged and presented. Certain news forms have been developed as packages or “frames” for transforming some experience into reports that will be recognized and accepted by the audience as “news.” Previous research has shown how the “problem frame” was encouraged by communication formats and in turn has promoted the use of “fear” throughout American society (Altheide, 1997). Other work has demonstrated that the linkage of crime with fear has promoted a discourse of fear, or the pervasive communication, symbolic awareness, and expectation that danger and risk are a central feature of everyday life (Altheide, 1997, 2002a; Altheide & Michalowski, 1999; Ericson & Haggerty, 1997).

It is not fear of crime, then, that is most critical. It is what this fear can expand to, what it can become. Sociologists have observed that we are becoming “armored.” Social life changes when more people live behind walls, hire guards, drive armored vehicles (e.g., sport utility vehicles), wear “armored” clothing—No Fear!—(e.g., “big soled shoes”), carry mace, handguns, and take martial arts classes. Indeed, many symbolic interactionists would assert that acting in certain ways provides the meaning or interpretation of fear. The problem is that these activities reaffirm and help produce a sense of disorder that our actions perpetuate. We then rely more on FASCs to “save us” by “policing them,” the “Others,” who have challenged our faith.

The major impact of the discourse of fear is to promote a sense of disorder and a belief that “things are out of control.” Ferraro (1995) suggests that fear reproduces itself or becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Social life can become more hostile when social actors define their situations as “fearful” and engage in speech communities through the discourse of fear. And people come to share an identity as competent “fear realists” as family members, friends, neighbors, and colleagues socially construct their effective environments with fear. Behavior becomes constrained, community activism may focus more on “block watch” programs and quasi-vigilantism, and we continue to avoid “downtowns” and many parts of our social world because of “what everyone knows.” In short, the discourse of fear incorporates crime reflexively; the agents, targets, and character of fear are constituted through the processes that communicate fear.

Fear is part of our everyday discourse, even though we enjoy unprecedented levels of health, safety, and life expectancy. And now we “play with it.” More of our “play worlds” come from the mass media. News reports are merging with TV “reality programs” and crime dramas “ripped from the front pages” that in turn provide templates for looking at everyday life (Cavender, 2004; Fishman & Cavender, 1998). The increase in “false reports” is an example. We have long known that some officials use fear to promote their own agendas. The expanding interest in fear and victim also contributes to (a) audiences who play with the repetitive reports as dramatic enactments of “fear and dread in our lives” and (b) individual actors who seek roles that are accepted as legitimate “attention-getters” to accomplish favorable identity vis-à-vis particular audience members.

Stories of assaults and kidnappings blasted across headlines—even when false or greatly distorted—make it difficult for frightened citizens to believe that schools are one the safest places in American society. It is becoming more common to “play out” scenarios of danger and fear that audiences assume to be quite commonplace. Researchers find that many of these hoaxes rely on stereotypes of marginalized groups (e.g., poor people and racial minorities). The oppositions that become part of the discourse of fear can be illustrated in another way as well. Repetitious news reports that make connections between fear, children, schools, and suspected assailants who fit stereotypes are easy to accept even when they are false. Kathryn Russell’s (1998) study of 67 publicized racially tinged hoaxes between 1987 and 1996 illustrates how story tellers frame their accounts in social identities that are legitimated by numerous reports and stereotypes of marginalized groups (e.g., racial minorities). For example, in 1990, a George Washington University student reported that another student had been raped by two Black men with “particularly bad body odor” to “highlight the problems of safety for women.”

Examples of crime hoaxes abound, but so do false terrorism reports. I have more in mind than the hundreds of “false reports” of anthrax that followed 9/11/01 attacks on the United States. When people “pretend” that they have been assaulted, abducted, or in some way harmed by strangers, they are acting out a morality play that has become part of a discourse of fear or the notion that fear and danger are pervasive. Indeed, a student’s project in New York City involved placing black boxes in the subway to elicit citizens’ concerns (Kimmelman, 2002).

At the same time it turned out that those 37 black boxes with the word “Fear” on them, which mysteriously turned up attached to girders and walls in the Union Square subway station last Wednesday, were, as you may have guessed from the start, an art project. The boxes, which spread panic and caused the police to shut the station for hours and call in the bomb squad, turn out to be the work of Clinton Boisvert, a 25-year-old freshman at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan, who surrendered Monday to the Manhattan district attorney’s office,

which intends to prosecute him on charges of reckless endangerment. (Kimmelman, 2002, p. 1)

Methods and Materials

This article draws from several research projects that used qualitative content analysis to track the discourse of fear over time and across different topics (e.g., crime, drugs, children, immigrants) presented in various newspapers (Altheide, 1996, 1997; Altheide & Michalowski, 1999). One way to approach these questions is by “tracking discourse,” a qualitative document analysis technique that tracks words, themes, and frames during a period of time, across different issues, and across different news media.

The aim in this study was to compare coverage of terrorism with crime and victim and note how these may be related to use of the word *fear*. The project examines the conceptual and empirical support for the politics of fear thesis, which may be stated as follows: The terms crime, victim, and fear are joined with news reports about terrorism to construct public discourse that reflects symbolic relationships about order, danger, and threat that may be exploited by political decision makers. The research design called for comparing several newspapers’ coverage of fear, crime, terrorism, and victim (in headlines and reports) at two 18-month time periods: Time 1 was from March 1, 2000, to September 10, 2001, and Time 2 was from September 12, 2001, to April 1, 2003. Eighteen months before and after September 11, 2001, provides sufficient time to track a change in discourse while avoiding brief spikes in reporting that may be associated with any event. The research design also called for including several major newspapers. The first newspaper examined was the *Los Angeles Times* (LAT). Subsequently, students in a seminar project obtained data from *The New York Times* (NYT), *Washington Post* (WPOST), the *San Francisco Chronicle* (SFCHRON), and *USA Today*. News reports were selected using Lexis/Nexis materials. News reports were selected according to search criteria that would identify articles with the words *fear*, *victim*, *crime*, and *terrorism* in various relationships or within several words of one another. For example, we examined reports with *fear* in headlines and *victim* in the body of the article.

The politics of fear thesis can be demonstrated by examining the nature and extent of news coverage of fear, crime, terrorism, and victims before and after the attacks of 9/11/01. The discourse of fear is considered to be expanded to incorporate the politics of fear if terrorism and victimization appear closely associated with fear in a substantial number of news reports after 9/11/01 (Time 2). Although some qualitative materials will be presented, the emphasis in this article is on the changes in the extent of coverage in news reports linking fear with terrorism and victimization that occurred after 9/11. The way in which news sources contributed to the politics of fear will be followed by an analysis of the increased use of fear, victim, and terrorism in news reports after 9/11.

News Sources and the Politics of Fear

A politics of fear rests on the discourse of fear. The politics of fear serves as a conceptual linkage for power, propaganda, news and popular culture, and an array of intimidating symbols and experiences, such as crime and terrorism. The politics of fear resides not in an immediate threat from an individual leader (e.g., Senator Joseph McCarthy [Griffith, 1987]) but in the public discourse that characterizes social life as dangerous, fearful, and filled with actual or potential victims. This symbolic order invites protection, policing, and intervention to prevent further victimization. A public discourse of fear invites the politics of fear. It is not fear per se that is important in social life but rather how fear is defined and realized in everyday social interaction that is important. The role of the news media is very important in carrying selective news sources' messages. News sources are claims makers, and studies of crime news show that government and police officials dominate how crime is framed (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1987, 1989; Surette, 1992).

Numerous public opinion polls indicated that audiences were influenced by news media reports about the attacks as well as the interpretations of the causes, the culprits, and ultimately the support for various U.S. military actions. For example, one study of the perceptions and knowledge of audiences and their primary source of news found that gross misperceptions of key facts were related to support of the war with Iraq. Misperceptions were operationalized as stating that clear evidence was found linking Iraq to Al-Qaeda, that weapons of mass destruction had been found, and that world opinion favored the Iraq War. Many of these misperceptions were consistent with news reports, particularly with the Fox News. The authors conclude the following:

From the perspective of democratic process, the findings of this study are cause for concern. . . . What is worrisome is that it appears that the President has the capacity to lead members of the public to assume false beliefs in support of his position. . . . In the case of the Iraq War, among those who did not hold false beliefs, only a small minority supported the decision to go to war. . . . It also appears that the media cannot necessarily be counted on to play the critical role of doggedly challenging the administration. (Kull et al., 2002, pp. 596-597)

The White House influence on news content was aided by other government and military officials who also dominated news reports about terrorism and fear.

But how men and women interpret and respond to their fear—these are more than unconscious, personal reactions to imagined or even real dangers. They are also choices made under the influence of belief and ideology, in the shadow of elites and powerful institutions. There is, then, a politics of fear. Since September 11, that politics has followed two distinct tracks: First, state officials and media pundits have defined and interpreted the objects of Americans' fears—Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism—in anti-political or non-political terms, which

has raised the level of popular nervousness; and, second, these same elites have generated a fear of speaking out not only against the war and US foreign policy but also against a whole range of established institutions. (Robin, 2002, p. 5)

Newspapers as well as TV network news relied heavily on administration sources that directed the focus and language of news coverage. This was particularly apparent with those persons interviewed. A study by the *Columbia Journalism Review* documented this trend:

It exacerbates our tendency to rely on official sources, which is the easiest, quickest way to get both the "he said" and the "she said," and, thus, "balance." According to numbers from the media analyst Andrew Tyndall, of the 414 stories on Iraq broadcast on NBC, ABC, and CBS from last September to February, all but thirty-four originated at the White House, Pentagon, and State Department. So we end up with too much of the "official" truth." (Cunningham, 2003, p. 24)

An analysis by Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (2003) of network news interviewees one week before and one week after Secretary of State Colin Powell addressed the United Nations about Iraq's alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction found that two thirds of the guests were from the United States, with 75% of these being current or former government or military officials, and only one—Senator Kennedy—expressed skepticism or opposition to the impending war with Iraq.

The news media played a major role in promoting the politics of fear following the 9/11/01 attacks. Dan Rather, CBS anchorman, acknowledged the pressure to comply with propaganda and that many of the tough questions were not being asked. Rather told a British journalist the following:

It is an obscene comparison . . . but you know there was a time in South Africa that people would put flaming tyres around people's necks if they dissented. And in some ways the fear is that you will be necklaced here, you will have a flaming tyre of lack of patriotism put around your neck. . . . Now it is that fear that keeps journalists from asking the toughest of the tough questions. . . .

It starts with a feeling of patriotism within oneself. It carries through with a certain knowledge that the country as a whole—and for all the right reasons—felt and continues to feel this surge of patriotism within themselves. And one finds oneself saying: 'I know the right question, but you know what? This is not exactly the right time to ask it.'

Limiting access, limiting information to cover the backsides of those who are in charge of the war, is extremely dangerous and cannot and should not be accepted. And I am sorry to say that, up to and including the moment of this interview, that overwhelmingly it has been accepted by the American people. And the current administration revels in that, they relish that and they take refuge in that. (Engel, 2002, p. 4)

Even news magazines like *Newsweek* concurred that the news was being managed:

News management is at the heart of the administration's shake-up of Iraq policy. The National Security Council recently created four new committees to handle the situation in Iraq. One is devoted entirely to media coordination—stopping the bad news from overwhelming the good. (Wolfe & Norland, 2003, p. 32)

Very dramatically, journalists cried on camera, wore flag lapels, and often referred to those involved in planning and fighting the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars as “we.” Moreover, they invoked routinely the claim that the “world is different,” security and safety can no longer be taken for granted, and many sacrifices would have to be made (Altheide, 2004). Numerous observers raised serious questions about the role that journalism played in covering the attacks, the wars with Afghanistan and Iraq that followed, and the increased surveillance and control of United States citizens.

The major media fully ignored gangbuster stories reported exhaustively overseas. Among them were: (1) a manifesto that described the invasion of Iraq and pacification of the Mideast penned in 1998 by a think tank whose board included a raft of current administration hawks . . .

In a rare case of breaking ranks, one news ‘celeb,’ NBC correspondent Ashleigh Banfield, took her industry to task in a speech at Kansas State University April [*sic*], averring that it had painted a ‘glorious, wonderful picture’ of war that ‘wasn’t journalism.’

Quoting Robert McChesney (Professor of Communications at the University of Illinois) “If the Soviet Union cited reasons like this in their invasion of Afghanistan and Pravda reported nothing but what the government said, we would’ve dismissed it out of hand. Our press hasn’t been much better. That sends [*sic*] a lot of Americans maybe not consciously but intuitively, looking for something our media is not offering.” (Grimm, 2003, p. 37)

The news reports that were published by a compliant press stressed fear of terrorism. The collective identity of victim of terrorist attacks was promoted by news reports stressing communal suffering as well as opportunities to participate in helping survivors and in defeating terrorism (Altheide, 2004). More traditional and culturally resonant narratives about crime, drugs, and evil were transformed into the “terror story.” Sorrow, suffering, empathy, and pain were merged with fear and vengeance. National character was played out in scenarios of heroics, sacrifice, suffering, marketing, and spending (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Patriotic responses to the attacks were joined with commercialism and pleas for donations as well as support for an ill-defined and nebulous “war on terrorism” that referred to an idea as well as a tactic or method. Building on a foundation of fear, citizens who saw the repetitive visuals of the World Trade Center attacks generously followed governmental directives to donate blood, supplies, and money to the immediate victims of the attacks. They were also urged to travel, purchase items, and engage in numerous patriotic rituals, while civil liberties were compromised and critics were warned by the Attorney General to not “give ammunition to America’s enemies.” This was the context for constructing the politics of fear.

News and the Politics of Fear

The politics of fear did not begin with 9/11; the politics of fear was extended from a long history associating fear with crime. A central argument of previous research (Altheide, 2002b) was that fear is cumulatively integrated into topics throughout time and indeed becomes so strongly associated with certain topics that, on repetition, is joined with that term—as with an invisible hyphen—and eventually the term *fear* is no longer stated but is simply implied. Examples from previous work include gangs, drugs, and in some cases even crime, although crime continues to be heavily associated with fear (Altheide, 2002b). Of course, fear is also connected to many other issues in social life, but the close connection with crime led to increased use and familiarity of fear in public discourse (Altheide, 2002b; Furedi, 1948-1997). My aim here is to show the continuity between major events—the attacks of 9/11/01—and a history of crime reporting emphasizing fear and social control. Victim and victimization are common to each (Chermak, 1995).

The key questions for this project concerned the comparisons between Time 1 and Time 2. The changes in coverage were considerable, although varied. Building on previous work, I was interested in whether fear and terrorism were strongly associated with articles featuring *fear* in headlines. Of course, they were but to varying degrees. Tracking changes in the use of *fear*, *crime*, *terrorism*, and *victim* in several newspapers 18 months before and after 9/11 reveals the following changes:

There was a dramatic increase in linking terrorism to fear.
Coverage of crime and fear persisted but at a very low rate.
There was a large increase in linking terrorism to victim.

First, as Figure 1 shows, the five newspapers that provided data for this project varied considerably in the increases of *fear* in headlines and *crime* in report. The *LAT*, which already had a strong “base” in crime reporting at Time 1, showed the least increase during Time 2 (32%), whereas *USA Today* (73%), *NYT* (85%), and *WPOST* (116%) all trailed the most massive increase in crime reporting by the *SFCHRON*, from 16 to 45 reports, for an increase of 181%, although about a third of these reports also dealt with terrorism. (It should be noted that *SFCHRON* had the smallest number of reports with *fear* in the headline and *crime* in reports at Time 1.) The relevance of terrorism and sensitivity to crime can be illustrated by an editorial on October 15, 2002, “Media Feeding the Fear,” which was about the “Tarot Card” serial killer who was shooting people, seemingly at random. In this and subsequent reports by other news media, shooting people is linked to terrorism, and the shooters are labeled as terrorists.

This inexplicable string of murders has triggered yet another disappointing over-reaction from the media. But this is different from the Chandra Levy or O.J.

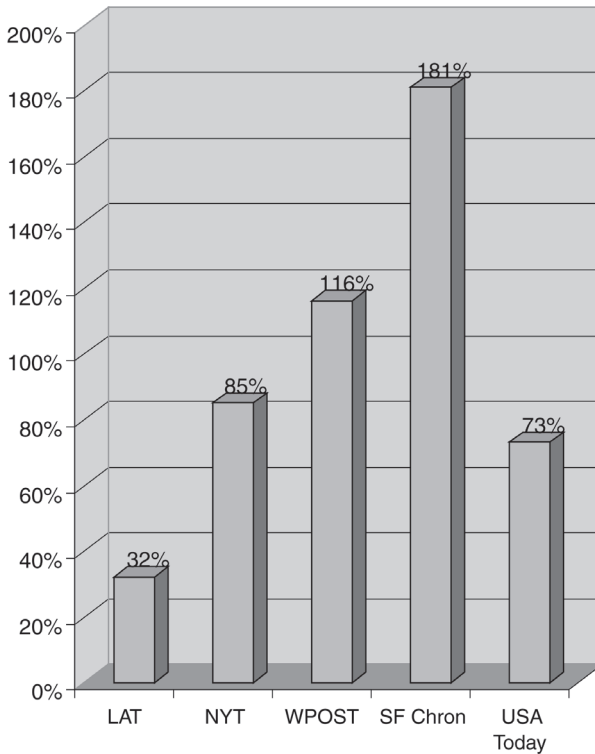


Figure 1: *Fear in headlines and crime in report changes (percentage) after 9/11/01*

NOTE: LAT = *Los Angeles Times*; NYT = *The New York Times*; WPOST = *The Washington Post*; SF Chron = *San Francisco Chronicle*.

Simpson overreactions. We are a different country from the one that weathered those stories. We feel more vulnerable to terrorism, and no matter how you cut it, this killer is a terrorist. His purpose, or at least one of them, is to spread terror. And the media playing right into his hands, as if Sept. 11 never happened.

"We may be entering a time when what has been ghetto-ized in Israel and the Middle East breaks its boundaries," says UC Berkeley dean of journalism Orville Schell, referring to suicide bombers and other acts of terrorism. "The unspoken thought is, 'What if this guy is a Muslim?' The media is feeding this most paranoid fear of all but without acknowledging it." . . .

The national climate of fear, energized by this psycho sniper, demands that the media examine its decisions more critically than ever. What kind of coverage serves the public interest? What information helps, and more important what harms? (Ryan, 2002, p. A23)

Next, Figure 2 shows the massive increase in reports that associated fear with terrorism. *Fear* in headlines and *terrorism* in news reports greatly exceeded the increases in *fear* and *crime*. Four of the five newspapers (the exception was WPOST) increased the linkage of fear with terrorism by more than 1,000%,

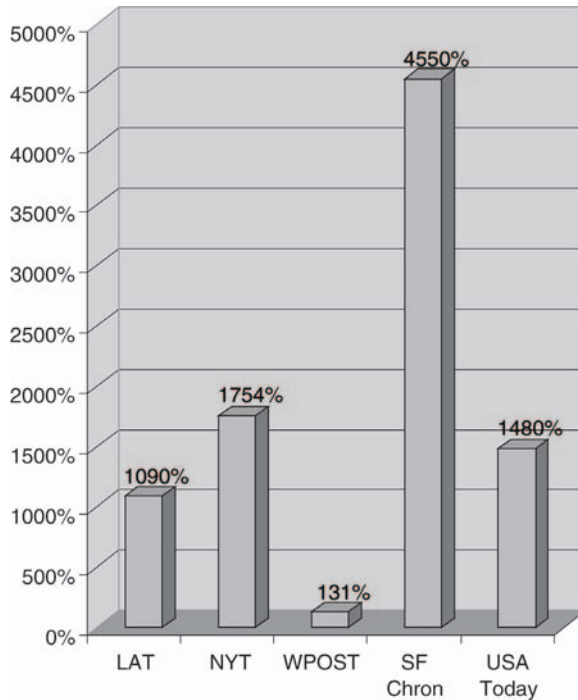


Figure 2: *Fear in headlines and terrorism in report changes (percentage) after 9/11/01*
NOTE: LAT = *Los Angeles Times*; NYT = *The New York Times*; WPOST = *The Washington Post*; SF Chron = *San Francisco Chronicle*.

with the *SFCHRON* exceeding 4,500%, because of having published only two reports of this nature before 9/11, at Time 1. Clearly, terrorism was a relatively new and bold connection for fear. This included a few articles that were critical of the government's use of *fear* to exact more social control, but the overwhelming majority demonstrated that terrorism was bonded to the discourse of fear.

A context of crime reporting proved to be consequential for the seemingly easy public acceptance of governmental proposals to expand surveillance and social control (Kellner, 2003). The resulting measures reflected a foundational politics of fear that promoted a new public discourse and justification for altering everyday life and social interaction. Although the following is informed by insights of others about social context and change (Shapiro, 1992; Thiele, 1993) and various studies about fear and the media (Furedi, 1948-1997; Glassner, 1999), and especially fear and crime (Chiricos et al., 1997; Ferraro, 1995), my focus is on political action that uses widespread audience perceptions about fear as a feature of crime, violence, deviance, terrorism, and other dimensions of social disorder.

The politics of fear is buffered by news and popular culture stressing fear and threat as features of entertainment that increasingly are shaping public and private life as mass-mediated experience has become a standard frame of reference for audiences, claims makers, and individual actors (Best, 1995). Similar to propaganda, messages about fear are repetitious, stereotypical of outside "threats" and especially suspect and "evil Others." These messages also resonate moral panic, with the implication that action must be taken to not only defeat a specific enemy but to also save civilization (Hunt, 1997). Because so much is at stake, it follows that drastic measures must be taken, that compromises with individual liberty and even perspectives about "rights," the limits of law, and ethics must be "qualified" and held in abeyance in view of the threat.

In addition to propaganda effects, the constant use of fear pervades crises and normal times; it becomes part of the taken-for-granted word of "how things are," and one consequence is that it begins to influence how we perceive and talk about everyday life, including mundane as well as significant events. Tracking this discourse shows that fear pervades our popular culture and is influencing how we view events and experience. This is particularly relevant for the use of victims and victimization, particularly in the context of 9/11.

Still another consequence of the emphasis on fear that foretells the emerging politics of fear is the rise of victimization. Entertaining news emphasizes fear and institutionalizes victim as an acceptable identity. Other work has shown that fear and victim are informed by perceived membership (Altheide et al., 2001).

Although news reports strengthened the connection between terrorism and fear, a critical symbol in the politics of fear is victim and victimization. Figure 3 shows the relationship of fear, crime, and victim. This figure demonstrates that there was a much larger increase in the 18 months after 9/11 in reports with *fear* within two words of *victim* than there was *fear* within two words of *crime*. Most striking for our argument about the expanded focus of fear and victim beyond crime after 9/11/01 were the clear increases in *fear* within two words of *victim* across the span of nationally prominent newspapers. On one hand, *USA Today* increased reports with *fear* within two words of *victim* by 280%, whereas on the other hand, the *LAT*, *NYT*, and *WPOST*, often regarded as among the nation's most prestigious newspapers, saw increases of nearly 100%. Examining the five newspapers shows that each greatly increased reports with *fear* within two words of *victim* at Time 2: *LAT* 108%, *NYT* 89%, *WPOST* 91%, *SFCHRON* 33%, and *USA Today* 280%. Moreover, three of the five newspapers published fewer reports with *fear* within two words of *crime* during the 18 months after 9/11. Indeed, all newspapers had either very little increase, or a decrease, in reports of *fear* within two words of *crime* at Time 2. For example, *USA Today* showed a 20% increase and *NYT* a 10% increase, whereas the *LAT* (–25%), *WPOST* (–8%), and *SFCHRON* (–13%) presented less coverage about *fear* within two words of *crime* than they did prior to 9/11.

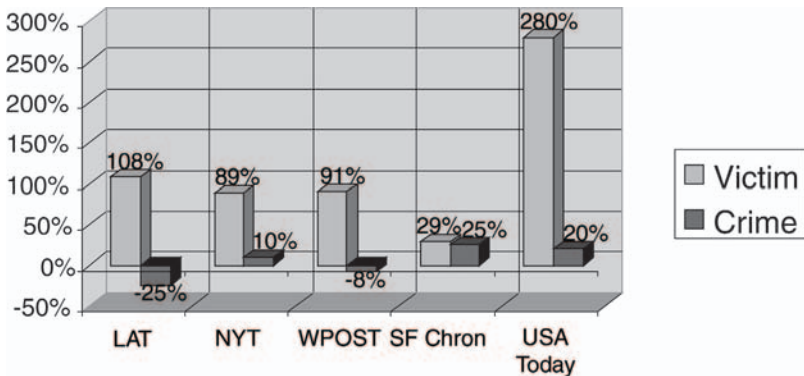


Figure 3: Changes (percentage) in reports with *fear* within two words of *victim* and *crime* after 9/11

NOTE: LAT = *Los Angeles Times*; NYT = *The New York Times*; WPOST = *The Washington Post*; SF Chron = *San Francisco Chronicle*.

The world of popular culture and news stressing crime and victimization promotes the pervasive awareness of “victimage” that is easily cultivated by officials who respond to terrorist acts. Victims abound in American life. Victims are but the personal side of crisis; a crisis is where victims reside (Chermak, 1995; Chiricos et al., 1997; Dubber, 2002; Ferraro, 1995; Warr, 1987). A personal crisis may affect “one victim,” but more generally, *crisis* refers to “social crisis,” involving numerous people. All take place in a time of fear. All of this requires that citizens have information and constant reminders of the pitfalls and hazards of life, whether potential or realized (Ericson & Haggerty, 1997). News reports, talk shows, news magazine shows, and a host of police and “reality crime dramas” seem to proclaim that everybody is a victim of something, even though they may not know it. The notion that “life is hard” and things don’t always work out the way we’d like seems to be lost on popular culture audiences who clamor for “justice,” “revenge,” and, of course, redemption, often in the form of monetary rewards. And it is not just in the United States.

It is in the USA that victimhood is most developed as an institution in its own right. . . . Victimhood is one of the central categories of the culture of abuse. . . . Celebrities vie with one another to confess in graphic detail the painful abuse they suffered as children. The highly acclaimed BBC interview with Princess Diana symbolized this era of the victim. (Furedi, 1948-1997, p. 95)

Just as our culture has become obsessed with fear, it has also become accepting of victim and victimization. My analysis of news and popular culture indicates that these two terms are linked. We even use the term *victim* when we don’t have a victim, for example, “victimless crime,” although reports are far more likely to stress the “victim” status. And certain domestic violence

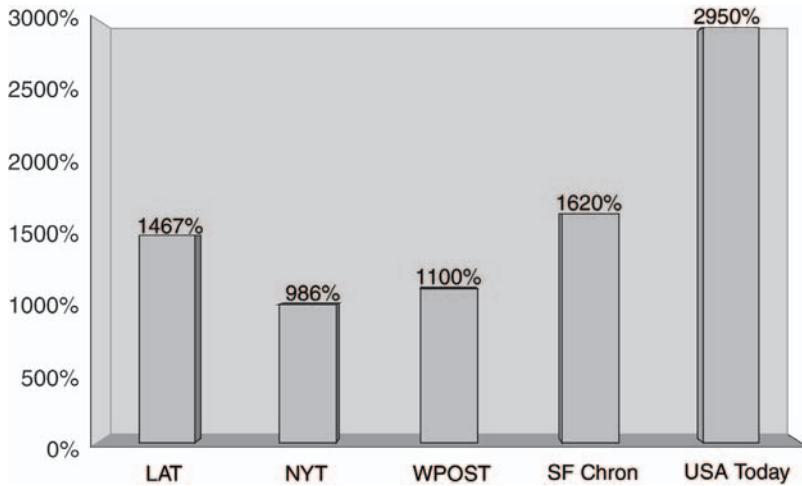


Figure 4: Changes (percentage) in reports with *fear* within two words of *terrorism* after 9/11/01

NOTE: LAT = *Los Angeles Times*; NYT = *The New York Times*; WPOST = *The Washington Post*; SF Chron = *San Francisco Chronicle*.

“presumptive arrest” policies define people as “crime victims,” even though they do not perceive themselves as such and refuse to press charges. We even have “indirect victim.”

Patriotism was connected with an expansive fear of terrorism and enemies of the United States. The term *terrorism* was used to encompass an idea as well as a tactic or method. The waging of the “War on Terrorism” focused on the “idea” and “the method” depending on the context of discussion and justification (Altheide, 2004). The very broad definition of *terrorism* served the central authorities’ purposes while also justifying action of others (e.g., Israel) in their own conflicts.

Figure 4 provides another important piece to the conceptual argument about the politics of fear. These data show that each of the newspapers substantially increased the number of reports with *fear* within two words of *terrorism* after 9/11. Indeed, *fear* continued to be used in close association with *terrorism* 18 months after the 9/11 attacks. Specifically, LAT 1,467%, NYT 986%, WPOST 1,100%, SFCHRON 1,620%, and USA Today 2,950%. Clearly, terrorism was strongly linked to the discourse of fear.

Discussion

The discourse of fear now includes terrorism as well as victimization and crime. Terrorism and fear have been joined through victimization. Crime established a solid baseline in its association with fear, and it continues to grow,

but it is terrorism that now occupies the most news space. The primary reason for this, as noted above in the discussion of news sources, is that government officials dominate the sources relied on by journalists. When journalists rely heavily on government and military officials to not only discuss an immediate war or military campaign but also for information about the security of the country, rationale for more surveillance of citizens, and comments about related domestic and international issues, then the body politic is symbolically cultivated to plant more reports and symbols about the politics of fear. This is particularly true during periods of war, such as the ongoing war with Iraq. Messages that the war on terrorism and the importance of homeland security, including periodic elevated "terror alerts," will not end soon lead journalists to turn to administration news sources for information about the most recent casualties, operations, reactions to counterattacks, and the omnipresent reports about soldiers, who have perished and those who are still in peril. In this sense, news updates from authoritative sources quickly merge with orchestrated propaganda efforts.

Terrorism plays well with audiences accustomed to the discourse of fear as well as political leadership oriented to social policy geared to protecting those audiences from crime. I am proposing, then, that the discourse of fear is a key element of social fears involving crime and other dreaded outcomes in the postmodern world. As rhetoricians have noted, terrorism is easily included within this perspective:

Terrorism, then, is first and foremost discourse. There is a sense in which the terrorist event must be reported by the media in order for it to have transpired at all. (Zulaika & Douglass, 1996, p. 14)

Terrorism is more than a narrative, but its essence is the definition of the situation, one that extends beyond the present into a distal future, gray but known. The forebodingness of events (e.g., 9/11 attacks) is cast as a terrible trend, inevitability, but the power comes from the uncertainty of "when" and "where." Like the prospective victims of crime in the future, citizens will be made terrorist victims in the future.

Terrorism—and especially the attacks of 9/11—enabled political actors to expand the definition of the situation to all Americans as victims. Moreover, all those fighting to protect actual and potential victims should be permitted to do their work, unimpeded by any concerns about civil liberties or adding context and complexity to the simple analysis that was offered: Evil people were attacking good people, and evil had to be destroyed.

Victimhood has also been expanded through the concept of the indirect victim. For example, people who witness a crime or who are simply aware that something untoward has happened to someone they know are potential indirect victims. . . . With the concept of the indirect victim, the numbers become tremendously augmented. Anyone who has witnessed something unpleasant or who has heard of

such an experience becomes a suitable candidate for the status of indirect victim. (Furedi, 1948-1997, p. 97)

Victims are a byproduct of fear and the discourse of fear. I contend that fear and victim are linked through social power, responsibility, and identity. The linkage involves concerns about safety and perceptions of risk. Thus, President Bush was relying on more than skilled speech writers in connecting the mafia and terrorism; he was also relying on the audience's acceptance of mythical mafia "dons" and "godfathers" depicted in entertainment to grease the conceptual slide of terrorism as a similar threat. What audiences were presumed to share, then, was the sense that terrorism, like crime—especially "mafia crime"—was a monstrous black hand that was invisible, omnipresent, all powerful and could only be stopped by a stronger force if ordinary Americans were to survive. I refer specifically to the "role and identity of victim," as held by numerous audiences, who expect victims to perform certain activities, speak a certain language, and in general follow a cultural script of "dependence," "lacking," and "powerlessness" while relying on state-sponsored social institutions to save and support them (D. Garland, 2001).

Indeed, President Bush and his administration attached drugs to terrorism and promoted commercials advocating the position that drug users, especially youth, are supporting terrorists. As Giroux (2003) notes,

blaming the young for terrorism not only reproduces the worst forms of demonization, it also ignores the complexity of the problems that promote drug use among young people and adults, problems rooted in a culture of commodification and addiction, poverty, unemployment and deep-seated alienation. (p. 15)

As noted above, the politics of fear refers to decision makers' promotion and use of audience beliefs and assumptions about danger, risk, and fear to achieve certain goals. The politics of fear promotes attacking a target (e.g., crime, terrorism), anticipates further victimization, curtails civil liberties, and stifles dissent as being unresponsive to citizen needs or even "unpatriotic." The Homeland Security Office advised the American people to buy duct tape and plastic sheeting as a barrier to terrorism. This advisory had little to do with "chemical protection" and much to do with the politics of fear.

This argument has no counterproposal because of the symbolic links that are made between an event, a threat, the avowed character, and purpose of the terrorists, who, like criminals, are constructed as lacking any reason, moral foundation, and purpose except to kill and terrify. Not likely to be ravaged by childhood diseases or workplace injuries, postindustrial citizens are prime potential victims, viewing mass-mediated scenarios of crime, mayhem, and destruction, they have no option but to believe and wait and wait:

The most typical mode of terrorism discourse in the United States has been, indeed, one of Waiting for Terror. . . . That which captivates every mind

is something so meaningless that it may never happen, yet we are forced to compulsively talk about it while awaiting its arrival. In the theater of the absurd, 'no significance' becomes the only significance. . . . When something does happen, after decades during which the absent horror has been omnipresent through the theater of waiting, the vent becomes anecdotal evidence to corroborate what has intuited all along—the by-now permanent catastrophe of autonomous Terror consisting of the waiting for terror. (Zulaika & Douglass, 1996, p. 26)

There can be no fear without actual victims or potential victims. In the postmodern age, victim is a status and representation and not merely a person or someone who has suffered as a result of some personal, social, or physical calamity. Massive and concerted efforts by moral entrepreneurs to have their causes adopted and legitimated as “core social issues” worthy of attention have led to the wholesale adaptation and refinement of the use of the problem frame to promote victimization (Best, 1995). Often couching their “causes” as battles for “justice,” moral entrepreneurs seek to promote new social definitions of right and wrong (Johnson, 1995; Spector & Kitsuse, 1977). As suggested above with the examples of hoaxes, victims are entertaining, and that is why they abound. They are evocative, bringing forth tears, joy, and vicarious emotional experience. But victim is more. Victim is now a status, a position that opens to all people who live in a symbolic environment marked by the discourse of fear (Chermak, 1995). We are all potential victims, often vying for official recognition and legitimacy.

Conclusion

This study documents how fear and terrorism have been joined with victimization since the 9/11 attacks. I argue that expanding the discourse of fear to include terrorism is consistent with an emergent politics of fear. I suggest that the politics of fear is a dominant motif for news and popular culture. Moreover, within this framework, news reporting about crime and terrorism are linked with “victimization” narratives that make crime, danger, and fear very relevant to everyday life experiences. Moreover, the changing social discourse is central to the process by which social problems are constructed (Best, 1999).

The politics of fear as public discourse represents an emergent feature of the symbolic environment: Moral entrepreneurs' claims making is easier to market to audiences anchored in fear and victimization as features of crime and terrorism. The politics of fear can be theoretically useful in understanding the relevance of mass-mediated fear in contemporary popular culture and political life. This concept is useful for clarifying the closer ties between entertainment-oriented news and popular culture, on one hand, and media-savvy state officials. The politics of fear joined crime with victimization through the “drug war,” interdiction and surveillance policies, and grand narratives that reflected numerous cultural myths about moral and social “disorder.” We are in the midst of an emerging politics of fear that discourages criticism, promotes

caution, and reliance on careful procedures to “not be hasty,” to “cover oneself,” to “not be misunderstood.” The politics of fear promotes extensive use of disclaimers, those linguistic devices that excuse a comment to follow by providing an explanation to not “take it the wrong way,” usually taking the form of “I am not unpatriotic, but . . .” or “I support our troops as much as anyone, but . . .”. Very few politicians will stand up to the politics of fear because it is the defining bulwark of legitimacy.

Skillful propaganda and the cooperation of the most powerful news media enabled simple lies to explain complex events. Like entertaining crime reporting, anticipation of wars, attacks, and the constant vigilance to be on guard is gratifying for most citizens who are seeking protection within the symbolic order of the politics of fear. The skillful use of heightened “terrorist alerts” to demand attention to the task at hand is critical in avoiding any detractor. And that is the key point: An otherwise sensible or cautionary remark that signals one is aware, rational, and weighing alternatives marks one as a detractor, someone who is “against the United States.”

The rituals of control are easier to accept as they become more pervasive and institutionalized. The politics of fear with a national or international justification is more symbolically compelling than “mere crime in the streets.” Accompanying heightened terror alerts are routine frisks, intrusive surveillance, and the pervasive voyeuristic camera, scanning the environment for all suspicious activity. Fear is perceived as crime and terrorism, whereas police and military forces are symbolically joined as protectors. The key point about physical security, surveillance (Staples, 2000), and body checking is to communicate the format of control to people as objects rather than subjects; they are objects to authorities, mere bodies that can be electronically waned, asked to disrobe, patted down, felt up, and unveiled like produce:

They seek to reduce individuals to objects rather than involving them as subjects. The element of direct, physical coercion is either open or poorly concealed and there is no further goal than that of either neutralising the threat or making it manageable. (Hornqvist, 2004, p. 41)

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