Notes Towards A Politics Of Fear

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"A good society is able to face schemes of world domination and foreign revolutions alike without fear."  Franklin D. Roosevelt

“People react to fear, not love—they don’t teach that in Sunday School, but it’s true.”  Richard Nixon

“Al Qaeda is to terror what the Mafia is to crime.”  George W. Bush

I wish to chart the conceptual terrain of crime, terrorism, and victim by examining the connection between the mass media and the politics of fear, or decision-makers’ promotion and use of audience beliefs and assumptions about danger, risk and fear in order to achieve certain goals.  My map is communication logic that is capable of time travelling and gaining “depth” for perspective, rather than two dimensional space that is time bound.  My “compass” is the discourse of fear or the pervasive communication, symbolic awareness, and expectation that danger and risk are a central feature of everyday life.  This discourse hones in on seemingly magnetic poles that distort experience and language.  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.  While most of the essay examines media depictions of crime, terrorism, and victim, I will present preliminary data from an ongoing study on news and the politics of fear.

A central argument of previous research (Altheide, 2002) was that fear is cumulatively integrated into topics over time, and indeed, becomes so strongly associated with certain topics that, upon 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.  My aim here is to show the continuity between major events—the attacks of 9/11—and a history of crime reporting emphasizing fear and social control.  This context of crime reporting
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proved to be consequential for the seemingly easy public acceptance of governmental proposals to expand surveillance and social control. The resulting measures reflected and promoted a foundational politics of fear. While 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, 1997; Glassner, 1999), and especially fear and crime (Chiricos et al., 1997; Ferraro, 1995), my focus is on political action that utilizes 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 and has become a standard frame of reference for audiences, claims-makers, and individual actors. Similar to propaganda, messages about fear are repetitious, stereotypical of outside “threats” and especially suspect and “evil others.” These messages also resonate moral panics, with the implication that action must be taken to not only defeat a specific enemy, but to also save civilization. Since 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. This produces a discourse of fear, the pervasive communication, symbolic awareness, and expectation that danger and risk are a central feature of everyday life. Tracking this discourse shows that fear pervades our popular culture and is influencing how we view events and experience.

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).

Fear is presented in the mass media, especially the news media as a feature of entertainment. The use of fear has increased dramatically over the last decade and a half, peaking around 1994. A qualitative content analysis from 1987 – 1996 of several major newspapers shows that the use of fear about doubled in headlines and text of news reports (Altheide and Michalowski, 1999). Fear is no stranger to major metropolitan newspapers in the United States, although the newspapers do vary considerably in their use of fear. The use of fear in headlines and text increased from 30-150% for most newspapers analyzed over a 7-10 year period, with the peak year in
1994. Many of these increases were associated with more emphasis on crime reporting.

Audiences play with the repetitive reports as dramatic enactments of "fear and dread in our lives". 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 suggests that fear reproduces itself, or becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (Ferraro, 1995). Social life can become more hostile when social actors define their situations as "fearful" and engage in speech communities through the discourse of fear. What are very rare events are assumed to be common occurrences. For example, audience members not only talk about brutal assaults and even child kidnappings—which are very rare—but they begin to enact them as hoaxes and to "play with fear" in order to get attention. And people come to share an identity as competent "fear realists" as family members, friends, neighbours and colleagues socially construct their effective environments with fear. Behaviour becomes constrained, community activism may focus more on "block watch" programmes and quasi-vigilantism, and we continue to avoid "downtowns," and many parts of our social world because of "what everyone knows."

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 programmes" and crime dramas" ripped from the front pages," that in turn provide us with templates for looking at everyday life. The increase in "false reports" is an example. We have long known that some officials use fear to promote their own childish agendas. The expanding interest in fear and victim also contributes to: 1. audiences who play with the repetitive reports as dramatic enactments of "fear and dread in our lives," and, 2: individual actors who seek roles that are accepted as legitimate "attention-getters" in order to accomplish favourable identity vis-à-vis particular audience members.

Consider a few examples: A mother in Mesa, Arizona, claimed that she was sexually assaulted in her child’s school restroom when a “man with cigarette breath, dirty fingernails and long, messy hair had placed a sharp object to her neck, knocked her unconscious and assaulted her.” (The Arizona Republic, 18 August 1999:A1) Actually, she wounded herself and cut up her clothing in order to get some attention, particularly from her husband.

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, for example 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. Katheryn
Russell’s 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, for example, racial minorities. In 1990, a George Washington University student reported that another student had been raped by two black men with “particularly bad body odour,” in order to “highlight the problems of safety for women.” (Russell, 1998)

Another example from Arizona: A school teacher in Tucson, wrote herself threatening letters before shooting herself. She had claimed that discipline and security were too lax. She implied that a 12 year old Hispanic youth sent the letters and then shot her. In spring, 1999, two Mesa, Arizona fifth grade girls, playing a game of Truth or Dare, told a detailed story about a knife-toting transient who grabbed them as they were leaving an elementary school. They fought off the man, whom they said “chewed his nails,” and escaped to a neighbour’s house. Police and neighbours patrolled the neighbourhood questioning various people, only to have the girls admit that it was false (Arizona Daily Wildcat, 11 April 2000).

Examples of crime hoaxes abound, but so do terrorism jollies. I have more in mind than the hundreds of “false reports” of anthrax that followed 9/11 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 in order to elicit citizens’ concerns (Kimmelman, 2002:E1)

‘By strange coincidence, New York City's crime rate was reported yesterday to be the lowest among the 25 largest cities in the United States, New York ranking 197th among 216 cities with at least 100,000 residents. This puts the city below squeaky-clean Provo, Utah, but (thank goodness) still above Rancho Cucamonga, Calif.

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…”It was my last class of the semester and everyone was presenting what they had done, and his was the last project before the break at 2 o'clock that afternoon," Ms. Schwartz said. "He put out snapshots he had taken around the subway station. He said he had taken the boxes to Union Square that morning and placed them in plain view of everyone. He said he had painted the word 'Fear' on them.
‘We were all saying, ‘Wow, how interesting,’ but I looked at him when it dawned on me. I said, ‘Clinton, you didn't leave them there, did you?’ One of the other students then said the trains were no longer stopping at Union Square and two others said there was a bomb threat. I said, ‘Oh my God, do you think this has something to do with your project?’ He looked stricken. He never imagined what would happen.'"(Kimmelman 2002:E1)

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 institutionalises “victim” as an acceptable identity. Other work has shown that fear and victim are informed by perceived membership (Altheide et al 2001). Crime and threats to the public order—and therefore all good citizens—is part of the focus of fear, but as noted throughout this paper, the topics change over time. What they all have in common is pointing to the "other," the outsider, the non-member, the alien. However, Schwalbe et al (2000) have shown that "othering," or invoking ad hoc membership criteria that defines people as outsiders, 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 socialisation 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 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, 2000:435)

It is not fear of crime, then, that is most critical. It is what this fear can expand to, what it can become. As sociologist Bernard Beck (nd) noted, we are becoming ‘armoured.’ Social life changes when more people live behind walls, hire guards, drive armoured vehicles (for example, Sport Utility Vehicles), wear "armoured" clothing--No Fear!-- (for example, "big soled shoes" and so on.), 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 formal agents of social control (FASC) to
"save us" by "policing them," the "others," who have challenged our faith. In short, the discourse of fear incorporates crime reflexively; the agents, targets and character of fear are constituted through the processes that communicate fear.

The world of popular culture and news stressing crime and victimisation promotes the pervasive awareness of victimization 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. 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 realised (Ericson and 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 Eagles' popular song, Get Over It, scolds individuals who seek to blame others for their circumstances and general condition. 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 clamour 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 symbolised this era of the victim.' (Furedi, 1997:95)

Just as our culture has become obsessed with fear, it has also become accepting of victim and victimisation. 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 "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".

'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, 1997:97).

Victims are a by-product 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 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. Clearly, the terrorists, like their criminal predecessors, had put us all at risk:

‘The precondition for the emergence of the victim identity was the consolidation of the consciousness of risk. In the UK and the USA, the growing fear of crime and the growing perception of risks have contributed to the sentiment that everyone is a potential victim. However, crime and the fear of crime are only the most striking manifestations of the kind of insecurity that strengthens the belief that everyone is at risk.’ (Furedi, 1997:100)

**Terrorism as Crime**

Enter terrorism. The attacks on certain buildings in the United States on 9/11 were cast as “terrorism,” and that term has now become widely used. Just as crime and criminality has emerged over decades with numerous myths, identities and characteristics of “criminals.” Just as “crime” resonates with audiences who tend to think of “violent crime,” and in turn, “criminal types, characteristics and images,” so too has terrorism. Terrorism has been socially constructed as a variant of crime, and as we shall see later, the terrorism story has been told as a crime story. Terrorists share with criminals’ motives, morality, and mentality. Selected from audience constructions of their acts, criminals (those who commit crimes), and terrorists (those who commit acts of terror), are deemed greedy, selfish, unethical, dispassionate, cruel, unfeeling, irrational, and demented. Criminals and terrorists are also cast as immoral (and indeed, evil), although they may simultaneously be presented as clever, but not intelligent enough to realise that their “tactics” work. A remarkable distinction is made between the “top” echelons of leadership of terrorists and those who carry out their orders. The latter are typically seen as brain-washed, crazy, zealots, and misled. Terrorist leaders, on the other hand, are seen as clever and adept at horrific devious deviancy beyond the imagination of sane and civilised people. Osama bin Laden is Fagin internationalised.

As noted above, the politics of fear refers to decision-makers’ promotion and use of audience beliefs and assumptions about danger, risk and fear in order to achieve certain goals. One definition of terrorism that I have found useful is: ‘the purposeful
act or threat of violence to create fear and or compliant behaviour in a victim and or audience of the act or threat’ (Lopez and Stohl, 1984:4). The politics of fear promotes attacking a target (for example, crime), terrorism, anticipates further victimisation, curtails civil liberties, and stifles dissent as being non-responsive 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. As one observer noted:

‘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.’¹

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 post-modern 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 and Douglass, 1996:14)

The pervasive threat of terrorism is given credibility by events that are interpreted as part of an unfolding and very uncertain schema for the future.

‘...terrorism discourse singles out and removes from the larger historical and political context a psychological trait (terror), an organisational structure (the terrorist network), and a category (terrorism) in order to invent an autonomous and aberrant realm of gratuitous evil that defies any understanding. The ironic dimension of terrorism discourse derives from its furthering the very thing it abominates.’ (Zulaika and Douglass, 1996:22)

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, grey but known. The forebodingness of events, for example, 9/11 attacks, are 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. This argument has no counter proposal because of the symbolic links that

¹ Robin, 2002
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v005/5.4robin.html
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. Americans are quite healthy and can expect to live a relatively long life, with little to dread except that which is inspired by mass mediated entertainment, including crime and fear. Not likely to be ravaged by childhood diseases or work-place injuries, post-industrial 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 theatre 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 theatre 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 and Douglass, 1996:26)

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 victimisation. Often couching their "causes" as battles for "justice," moral entrepreneurs seek to promote new social definitions of right and wrong (Johnson, 1995; Spector and 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 open to all people who live in a symbolic environment marked by the discourse of fear. We are all potential victims, often vying for official recognition and legitimacy.

The politics of fear is bound with our culture and values, but it tends to be associated with certain topics, issues, and times. The discourse of fear promotes the politics of fear but they are not the same. The critical factor is the target or issue to which the discourse of fear is directed. Perhaps it was natural that the terrorist attacks fed off this context of fear. The drug war and ongoing concerns with crime led to the expansion of fear with terrorism. News reports and advertisements joined drug use with terrorism and helped shift “drugs” from criminal activity to unpatriotic action.
Entertaining Fear

The main focus of the discourse of fear in the United States for the last thirty years or so has been crime. Formal agents of social control (FASC) have benefited from crime by building new institutions, assuming more authority over civil liberties, and above all, promoting crime victims as a special category of citizens: The entertainment media have enabled all citizens to participate in one of more aspects of Victimisation, including its practice, anticipation, avoidance, and support. Crime and terrorism discourses are artfully produced. The most pervasive aspect of this "victim" perspective is crime. Politicians and state control agencies, working with news media as "news sources," have done much to capitalise on this concern and to promote a sense of insecurity and reliance on formal agents of social control--and related businesses--to provide surveillance, protection, revenge and punishment to protect us, to save us. Indeed, an analysis by FAIR of network news interviewees one week before and one week after Secretary of State Colin Powell addressed the United Nations, found that two thirds of the guests were from the United States, with 75% of these being current or former government or military officials, while only one, Senator Kennedy, expressed scepticism or opposition to the impending war with Iraq. Even foreign policy and threats of external enemies support fear:

‘The constant articulation of danger through foreign policy is thus not a threat to a state's identity or existence: it is its condition of possibility. While the objects of concern change over time, the techniques and exclusions by which those objects are constituted a dangers persist.’ (Campbell, 1998:13)

And,

‘…the postwar tests of United States foreign policy certainly located the dangers they identified via references to the Soviet Union. But they always acknowledged that the absence of order, the potential for anarchy, and the fear of totalitarian forces or other negative elements that would exploit or foster conditions--whether internal or external--was their initial concern.’ (Campbell, 1998:30)

Criminal victimisation, including numerous crime myths (for example, predators, stranger-danger, random violence, and so on.) (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. 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. The very broad definition of terrorism served the central authorities’ purposes while also justifying action of others (for example, Israel) in their own conflicts.
‘...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.'

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.

The news media played a major role in this activity. 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. More traditional and culturally resonant narratives about crime, drugs, and evil were, essentially, 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. 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 Centre 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.

The collective identity of “victim of terrorist” attacks was promoted by news reports stressing communal suffering, commercial enterprises (for example, “keep American rolling,” gun and security operations, and so on.) as well as opportunities to participate in helping survivors and in defeating terrorism. A reinvigorated politics of fear followed. Attorney General Ashcroft made it clear that anyone concerned with the civil rights of the suspicious was also suspect. Ashcroft told members of Senate Committee that critics "aid terrorists" and undermine national unity:

"To those who pit Americans against immigrants and citizens against non-citizens, to those who scare peace-loving people with phantoms of lost liberty, my message is this: Your tactics aid terrorists, for they erode our
national unity and diminish our resolve," he said. "They give ammunition to America's enemies, and pause to America's friends." (Jurkowitz 2002:10)

The politics of fear was renewed by promoting victimisation-as-symbol of “unity”. This was operationalised with the “Air Transportation Safety and System Stabilisation Act” which became the “Victim Compensation Fund”, and established the notion that those who died in the attacks of 9/11 were unlike any victims in U. S. history. While the multi-billion dollar payout to relatives of those who died was motivated and initiated as a way to save the airline industry—within 72 hours of the attacks!—it quickly became a noble cause for the symbolic elevation of the event and the “terrorists” who caused it to show that these were victims, unlike any other. Begrudgingly, those who died in other “attacks” were added to the list of potential recipients, but excluded were those who died in attacks such as the Oklahoma City bombing. As one retired foreign service officer, whose wife was killed in the bombing of the American Embassy in Nairobi (7 August 1998) put it, ‘We were the first victims of Al Qaeda’ (Belkin, 2002:92). Yet he disagreed that the Oklahoma City bombing victims should be compensated: “Oklahoma City is completely different. McVeigh and Nichols were just home-grown malcontents. They were criminals. Where do you draw the line.” (My emphasis)

The politics of fear relied on terrorism as a constant threat that can never be defeated; The term “terrorism” was used to encompass an idea as well as a tactic or method. Like the Mafia, it was everywhere and nowhere, all-powerful, but invisible. Crime helped shape the direction for terrorist victimisation. The politics of fear joined crime with victimisation through the “drug war,” interdiction and surveillance policies, and grand narratives that reflected numerous cultural myths about moral and social “disorder”. Numerous “crises” and fears involving crime, violence, and uncertainty were important for public definitions of the situation after 9/11. So perhaps it was natural that the terrorist attacks fed off this context of fear. The drug war and ongoing concerns with crime led to the expansion of fear with terrorism. News reports and advertisements joined drug use with terrorism and helped shift “drugs” from criminal activity to unpatriotic action. A $10 million ad campaign that included a Super Bowl commercial stated that buying and using drugs supports terrorism, or as President Bush put it, “If you quit drugs, you join the fight against terror in America.” (Tribune Newspapers, Saturday, 15 December 2001:A15). The head of the Drug Enforcement Administration urged Congress to provide $18 million to fight drug production and transportation in Afghanistan:

“"We have to understand that by reducing demand for drugs, we will also reduce the financial structure that supports terrorist groups," Hutchinson told the senators. "There is multisource information that Osama bin Laden himself has been involved in the financing and facilitation of heroin trafficking activities...It seems to me that we have an opportunity today to really change the farm processes in Afghanistan," she said. "If we can't do it today, when our people are there, we are never going to be able to do it."
Hutchinson and the State Department's assistant secretary for international narcotics suggested there might be significant impediments that keep the United States from destroying the upcoming crop.' (Dallas Morning News, 14 March 2002:KO487, reprinted in the The Arizona Republic, 14 March 2002:A8)

But this is not about a play, although it is about drama and the construction of evil. Crime and terrorism are joined conceptually in cultural narratives that reflect mythology, literature, morality, and news reports. Histories most dramatic statements connect symbols of good and evil that are gleaned from heroic and horrific events that in turn are joined with symbols of good and evil. The spin of history turns on the axis of symbolic order, often polished for a smoother ride by denizens of morality and redemption. Crime and terror spin together.

Victims in the News

I have studied, along with several students, the relationship and changing connections between fear, crime, and victims. The first project took place within days of the initial 9/11 attacks. Other projects followed during the next two years, including another seminar effort in which students tracked the discourse of fear across several newspapers. We sought to understand how the key symbols of disorder of our day (crime and terrorism) were joined with the legitimate vanquished of our day, not the poor, the hungry, the sick, and disposed, but those known as victims, those who hold the status of being linked to the “problem,” that is the foundation for massive government and respected citizen concerns; it is these problems that constitute our quest for the perfect order because, after all, if these problems were not there, we would have the order. But we never quite achieve it because these problems, while changing, do not go away. But it is only certain problems that really matter for this control narrative, and these problems now are crime and terrorism.

Entertainment powers fear. Fear in the news is constant, although the problems, topics, and issues with which it is associated change over time. Fear expands as more topics are processed through entertainment formats. This process can be illustrated by comparing news reports about fear with crime, terrorism, and victim. We wanted to understand whether and to what extent terrorism would “challenge” crime for “ownership” of fear and victim.

This project was inspired by the extraordinary amount of coverage given terrorism after the attacks on several buildings in the United States on 9/11. The aim was to compare coverage of terrorism with crime and victim and note how these may be related to use of the word fear. Accordingly, the research design called for comparing newspaper 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. Time 2 was from 12 September 2001 to 1 April 1 2003. 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 (SF Chron), and USA Today. News reports were selected using Lexis/Nexis materials. News reports were selected according to search criteria (below). A sample of these reports were then analysed qualitatively using a protocol that was constructed through an emergent process described elsewhere. The search criteria consisted of the following:

1. Reports with “fear” in headlines and “victim” in report.
2. Reports with “fear” in headlines and “crime” in report.
3. Reports with “fear” in headlines and “terrorism” in report.
4. Reports with “fear” in headlines and “crime” and “terrorism” in report.
5. Reports with “victim” and “fear” in headlines.
7. Reports about “victim” within 2 words of “fear”.
8. Reports about “crime” within 2 words of “fear”.
9. Reports about “terrorism” within 2 words of “fear”.
10. Reports dealing with “crime,” “terrorism,” and “victim”.

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, we were interested in whether fear and terrorism were strongly associated with articles featuring “fear” in headlines. Of course, they were, but to varying degrees. First, 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%), while USA Today (73%), The New York Times (NYT) (85%), Washington Post (WPOST) (116%), all trailed the most massive increase in crime reporting by the San Francisco Chronicle (SFCHRON), from 15 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 report at Time 1.) The relevance of terrorism and sensitivity to crime can be illustrated by an Editorial on 15 October 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 labelled as terrorists:

‘This inexplicable string of murders has triggered yet another disappointing overreaction from the media. But this is different from the Chandra Levy or O.J. 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-ised 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, energised 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:A22)

Fear in headlines and terrorism in news reports greatly exceeded the increases in reference to crime. For example, the WPOST increase of 131% was quite modest; the other newspapers increased the linkage of fear with terrorism by more than 1000%, with the San Francisco Chronicle exceeding 4,500%. Clearly, terrorism was a relatively new and bold connection for fear. This included articles that were critical of the government’s use of fear to exact more social control, but nevertheless, terrorism was bonded to the discourse of fear.

The connection between fear and crime and victim is illustrated by examining the increase in reports with fear within two words of crime and fear within two words of victim. (Recalling an argument from our earlier work that suggested that, over time, crime and fear become joined, it is nevertheless of interest that crime was still associated with fear.) However, the change from Time 1 shows that all newspapers had either very little increase in reports of fear within two words of crime. USA Today showed a 20% increase, and the NYT a 10% increase, while the Los Angeles Times (LAT) (-25%), WPOST (-8%), and SFCHRON (-13%) presented less coverage about fear within two words of crime than they did prior to 9/11.

Most striking for our argument about the expanded focus of fear and victim beyond crime after 9/11 were the clear increases in fear within two words of victim, including a 280% increase by USA Today, and nearly 100% increases by the LAT, NYT, and WPOST, often regarded as among the nation’s most prestigious newspapers. A closer “internal” look at variations in the LAT indicates that the emphasis on crime decreased compared to more attention given to terrorism. For example, at Time 1, only 1% of stories with fear in the headlines had crime and terrorism in the report. This increased to 8% at Time 2. Most striking is the headline changes. There was a 1600% increase in reports with terrorism and fear in the headlines at Time 2, and nearly a 1600% increase in reports with terrorism within two words of fear.

The upshot is that terrorism and victim have been more closely joined with fear at Time 2, while Time 1 reporting, with some exceptions, was more likely to associate fear and victim with crime. Victim continued to “grow” from crime at Time 2, but it was engorged by fear. Terrorism and fear have been joined through victimisation. While crime and terrorism do co-exist and can expand together, it is clear that terrorism is more strongly associated at this time with victim than is crime. 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 is the ongoing war with Iraq, including publicity about its name, Operation Enduring
Freedom. As the president continues to stress that the war on terrorism will not end soon, journalists still turn to administration news sources for information about the most recent casualties, operations, reactions to counter-attacks, as well as the omnipresent reports about soldiers who have perished and those who are still in peril.

The propaganda of terrorism is constructing the politics of fear. Journalists do not like to be part of the propaganda campaign, but they realise that they will be used, just as they use the war and violence for their own reporting purposes. As the journalism story partly shifts from the "rah rah" and preparation, away from the actual military campaign, which presumably ended months ago, to the rebuilding of Iraq, the reporting focus and strategy also shifts. The sheer dimension of the information campaign requires clever orchestration of an entertainment oriented news media that values explosive visuals, whether of US forces bombing during the "official" war or of military vehicles shredded by Iraq guerrilla forces during the extended "mopping up" operations. When savvy reporters go around the controlled military briefings and seek out information about soldiers' morale in the midst of seemingly random attacks on their positions and patrols, the news sent home is not very good. To counter such reporting which often strikes military flacks as unpatriotic and critical, programmes have been undertaken to send news organisations numerous "fake" letters from soldiers, extolling their high morale how well things are going and thanking the folks back home for their support. These letters were written by military public relations officials, but were passed off as the views of soldiers.

‘Letters home from the war front are some of the revered aspects of history, a treasury of soldiers' impressions and firsthand narratives that hold a value apart from the individual lives put firmly on the battle line. It's all the more disturbing, then, that an apparently orchestrated campaign of letter writing has arisen among some of the American forces in Iraq to highlight what are alleged to be overlooked success stories. What amounts to a warmly worded form letter telling of open-armed welcomes and rebuilt infrastructure was printed by hometown newspapers in the mistaken belief that it was the individual composition of the undersigned soldier in Kirkuk, a relatively peaceful city in Iraq. According to the Gannett News Service, which uncovered the deception, one soldier said his sergeant had distributed the letters to the squad, while another traced his to an Army public affairs officer.\(^3\)

Conclusion

The politics of fear joined crime with victimisation 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.

Skilful 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 skilful 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 institutionalised. Fear is perceived as crime and terrorism, while police and military forces are symbolically joined as protectors. 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 always constant voyeuristic camera, scanning the environment for all activity, whether suspicious or innocent. The staple of the politics of fear—crime—is now linked with terrorism, and victimisation.

References


