

# Terrorist Crime Reporting

Fear of Victimisation and the Surveillance Society

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## Introduction

There are many reasons to examine the prominent representation of crime in the media ranging from concerns about media effects (Can media cause deviant or criminal behaviour?) over questions whether media provides means for crimes to the media's creation of moral panics and sentiments of insecurity (Jewkes, 2004, 3ff; Surette, 2007, 2ff; Chermak, 1995, 3). However, the most important reason according to Surette (2007, 2) is the media's impact on criminal justice policy. "Much of our criminal justice policy exists because of the impact of high-profile crimes being co-opted as symbols for specific policy campaigns" (Surette, 2007, 3). The media has always shaped the public opinion on crime, what we consider to be deviant or criminal and which punishment we consider to be appropriate (Jewkes, 2004, 17f).

In this paper, I want to focus on this major topic in the relationship of media and crime using the discussion about body scanners in the German press as an example. Even though the discussion has been continuing for more than one year, there was a recent spin of attitude after the attempted terrorist attack from the 26<sup>th</sup> of December 2009 on an airplane from Amsterdam to Detroit. In the following, I want to set the reporting about the terrorist attack and the emerging discussion about body scanners in the aftermath in context to relevant theoretical frameworks in the academic field of media & crime research including victimisation, social constructionism, crime policy making and surveillance.

## The Research Field

The relationship of media and crime can be modelled as a process. Starting from the study of motives of crimes (and whether the media provides these) over the representation of crime in the media including crime reporting and crime as entertainment to the effects that crime in the media has on its receivers. Depending on the respective research field, all of these stages have been addressed by researchers from various academic fields such as sociology, criminology, media studies, psychology, or art sciences (Jewkes, 2004, 3). Motives of crime in relation to media have been in focus of strain theorists attesting the media to create cultural goals and desires which exclude certain people from society (cf. Jewkes, 2004, 13f). The representation of crime

in the media has been for example in the centre of studies on the representation of victims (Chermak, 1995), children (Jewkes, 2004, Ch. 4), anticrime programs (Surette, 2007, Ch. 7) or newsworthiness (Jewkes, 2004, Ch.2). The depiction of precious topics and material on crime has moreover been a major concern in Marxist media studies as well as in pluralistic and other power-centred studies on the topic (cf. Jewkes, 2004, 16 – 24).

The effects of crime in the media have been especially in focus of media studies researching on moral panics, social constructionism as well as in context of media theories such as agenda-setting or the cultivation approach. The question if crime in the media affects the recipient's attitude towards violence or leads to aggressive behaviour is a very prominent research field here that comes occasionally into focus of public interest. After very brutal crimes such as the massacre in Littleton, Colorado, in the year 1999 for instance, debates about the affection and persuasion of crime in media products such as video games resurrect (cf. Kunczik & Zipfel, 2007, 215). The intensive research has originated various theories that cover the field and sometimes contradict each other (Kunczik & Zipfel, 2007, 2016ff). According to Surette (2007, 86) however, a direct influence of the media on criminal behaviour can if at all only be stated in "at-risk individuals" who have a predisposition towards crime. He sums up the contemporary state of research as followed: "A media-generated criminogenic effect ultimately depends on the combined influences of social context, media content and audience characteristics" (Surette, 2007, 87).

Besides these varying theoretical and functional approaches towards the interdependence of media and crime, authors have examined different kinds of crimes and their reflection in the media with an emphasis on these crimes that are typically intensively covered by the media – as for instance terrorist attacks.

## **Media-Oriented Crime and Victimisation**

The interrelation between terrorism and the media is of high interest, since both share the same goal to reach the greatest number of people possible. Whereas most criminological theories about primary crime causes are of biological, psychological, sociological or political constitution (cf. Surette, 2007, 65f), the cause as well as the reward for terrorist attacks is media covering itself. This symbiosis of symbolic terrorist

action and commercial media reaction led to a new type of terrorism: the “media-oriented terrorist event” (Surette, 2007, 83).

*“Media-oriented terrorism is ‘propaganda by deed’, a purposely symbolic crime, and today a steady stream of terrorist acts can be identified as media-oriented terrorist events characterized by the selection of high-visibility targets, graphic terrorist acts, prevent contact with media outlets, and postevent videos, interviews, and other media accommodations” (ibid.)*

The terrorists have reached their goal, if the media spreads their message, and it most likely will (cf. Surette, 2007, 85). The victims are symbolic and random (ibid.), which creates a general fear of victimisation. “Terrorist attacks on ‘innocent’ civilians chime with the post-modern idea that we are all potential victims” (Jewkes, 2004, 28).

This fear is backed by a general trend in the media to put the victim in the centre of crime reporting. After a decreasing importance of the victim in connection with increasing state dominance in the criminal justice system, crime victims have found their way back in legislative crime debates due to the emergence of victim interest groups and media appearance (Chermak, 1995, 6). According to Pollack (2002, 195), the rights of crime victims have become a major concern in the context of crime policies in Sweden. In news media, victims and witnesses play today an important role in the choice and covering of crimes – as a source as well as a news value. “Among the most powerful and sensationalized stories are those regarding the victimization of clearly innocent victims and those involving vigilantes” (Chermak, 1995, 9). These stories frame an extreme binary opposition of evil and dominant offenders and innocent and defenceless victims (cf. ibid.). This sensationalistic victimisation contributes to the high newsworthiness of terrorist attacks and increases their scary event character.

Examining the covering of the attempted terrorist attack on the 26<sup>th</sup> of December 2009, the described mechanisms can be traced. The attack gained huge coverage by the media, there was a claim of responsibility by Al Qaeda in Yemen that featured a message propagated by the media (cf. Leyendecker, 2009), and the vigilante that could overbear the attacker got fast into focus of the media. However, since the terrorist attack failed, media interest shifted quickly from the victims to general security questions and policies.

## Social Constructionism and Crime Policy Making

Besides the pure act of information, news media has an intermediary function. Through media, the public can question the institutions and moreover, media ensures an open discussion of differing opinions (cf. Chermak, 1995, 168). However, to think that media reflects reality as it is, is a rather naïve perspective. In contemporary media studies, it is common sense to speak of a media reality – a construction of reality through the lens of the media. According to Jewkes (2004, 37), media images “are a version of reality that is culturally determined” depending on production processes of news organisations and the assumption that media professionals make about their audience. Media research has stated that this constructed reality results in socially constructed assumptions about crime in society that contradicts statistical reality. Smolej & Kivivuori (2006, 220) for instance found out that reading tabloid front pages leads to a higher level of worry about becoming a victim of violence. According to Hough and Roberts (1999 cited in Marsh & Gaynor, 2009, 181), the British Crime Survey showed that “the majority of respondents (78%) felt that at least 30% of crime involved violence (while official statistics showed the figure to be only 6%)”. Fear of crime as a social problem can therefore be described as a social construction. But who is responsible for social constructions and which consequences do they have?

If there is an ideological struggle about crime policies, the media is certainly the place where differing opinions clash. Besides the police as the major source of crime news, crime reporting regularly features comments of politicians as well as interest groups.

*“Marxist-inspired critical criminologists argue that politicians, the media and the criminal justice system set the agenda for public debate about crime and the implementation of criminal justice, and collude in perpetuating notions of ‘enemies within’” (Jewkes, 2004, 141)*

The relationship between media and the criminal justice system can thus be pictured as a spiral. While on the one hand, “crime and justice events become grist for the media” (Surette, 2007, 5), “politicians and criminal justice professionals use information provided in the news to make decisions” (Chermak, 1995, 177). Surette (2007, 2f) provides many examples where media products affected laws and the attitude of politicians. The media coverage of certain crimes, their problematisation in the media

and the resulting public awareness for a risk evokes the need for a policy response (Surette, 2007, 3). The debate about body scanners after the terrorist attack of the 26<sup>th</sup> of December can provide an example for some of the mentioned.

When the EU-Commission released its decree to allow body scanners on European airports in autumn 2008, there was a great wave of outrage backed by politicians, organisations such as the police association and influential press organs such as the major German liberal newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. In an editorial written by the head of the department of politics, Heribert Prantl, the newspaper positioned itself clearly against the use of body scanners calling it a “pubertal fantasy” that violates human dignity (Prantl, 2008).

One year later, body scanners came again into discussion in the media, this time in context with the attempted terrorist attack on an airplane on the 26<sup>th</sup> of December 2009. However, the opinion towards body scanners had changed. Even though still sceptical, many politicians and press organs revealed a more pragmatic access to the topic. Improved technologies that would protect privacy to a greater extent were cited as a reason to reconsider the use of the scanners, but also the fact that there was a concrete criminal case that body scanners could have prevented led the argumentation.

In another editorial from the 30<sup>th</sup> of December, Heribert Prantl underlined his attitude towards body scanners this time though with a rather moderate rhetoric condemning the fact that everybody without any suspicion had to walk through the scanner (Prantl, 2009). However, in the same issue, an interview from Heribert Prantl with the German Minister of the Interior Thomas de Maizière was published. In this interview, de Maizière expressed a rather optimistic notion about an early use of the scanners and rather concrete ideas of how this could be politically achieved (cf. de Maizière, 2009). Four days later, another editorial on the topic was published. The editor this time was Susanne Höll. She remarked only minor concerns about the violation of privacy and had no objections to use the scanners – at least not from a “morally-ethical perspective” (Höll, 2010).

It is remarkable how the public discussion about an instrument of surveillance changed after a serious crime that had reached the news. Even though nobody got hurt in the terrorist attack, the constructed insecurity made an anew debate about body scanners possible and its use on German airports even more plausible. The fear of terroristic attacks plays generally an important role in the surveillance and crime prevention

debate. "Yet it is frequently claimed that, in the wake of the terrorist attacks on America in September 2001, the climate of political and public acceptability become more favourable to the idea of surveillance" (Jewkes, 2004, 182).

The idea to control the human body to prevent crimes is a prominent issue of crime prevention policies and improved (media) technologies help out. The example of fingerprinting shows further that once a form of surveillance has been introduced, it quickly loses its stigma (Jewkes, 2004, 179). Without arguing for or against the use of body scanners, there is a general risk that (socially constructed) fear of crime could be exploited to create a society of total surveillance. According to Surette (2007, 193), the resistance of citizens against surveillance is surprisingly low in trade off a reduction in victimisation and fear. However, there is a great concern that fear of crime could be replaced by fear of authority (ibid.). In this context, Foucault introduced the concept of a 'carceral society' – a society "whereby more and more aspects of public life are becoming subject of the kind of disciplinary power that we usually associate with the prison" (Jewkes, 2004, 177).

The debate about the body scanners in the context of the terrorist attack in December 2009 shows clearly how instruments of surveillance can become normal when they are put into the context of crime and fear of crime.

## Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to set the reporting on terrorist attacks into the context of social constructionism and the surveillance society. As mentioned, the media and their coverage of terrorism have a great influence on crime policy making on the one hand and the public acceptance of policies on the other. The creation of a general fear of victimisation leads to the need of a political respond and the acceptance of crime prevention measures. The interrelation between the media and terrorism however, is of a very delicate character, since both follow the same goal – to reach as many people as possible.

The small analysis of the debate about body scanners in the German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* after the terrorist attack in December 2009 encourages digging deeper into this topic. A major study on the discussion on crime prevention policies after terrorist attacks could be of high interest. The topic of body scanners seems to be a useful topic in such a study, since it allows a comparison of the debate on crime

prevention policies without criminal context (the release of the EU-decree in autumn 2008) with the discussion about the same policies in criminal context (the prevention of a concrete case in winter 2009).

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