

MASS MEDIA, CRIME, AND THE DISCOURSE OF FEAR

David L. Altheide

David L. Altheide is Regents' Professor in the School of Justice Studies at Arizona State University. He is the author of numerous books, including Creating Fear: News and the Construction of Crisis (2002); Qualitative Media Analysis (1996); An Ecology of Communication: Cultural Forms of Control (1995); Media Worlds in the Postjournalism Era (with Robert P. Snow, 1991); and Media Power (1985).

Introduction

The crime scene, marked off in yellow police tape, doesn't move; no matter when the reporter arrives there's always a picture to shoot, preferably live. No need to spend off-camera time digging, researching, or even thinking. Just get to the crime scene, get the wind blowing through your hair, and the rest will take care of itself.¹

CRIME AND FEAR DOMINATE MOST U.S. NEWSPAPERS AND television news reports. Objective indicators of risk and danger in American life suggest that most U.S. citizens are healthier, safer, and live more predictable lives than at any time in history, yet numerous surveys indicate these same citizens perceive that their lives are very dangerous. This essay examines how crime coverage is linked to

¹ Lawrence K. Grossman, "Why Local TV News is So Awful," *Columbia Journalism Review* (Nov/Dec 1997): 21.

entertainment formats that provide the basic underlying logic of commercial television (and newspapers). Drawing from more than a decade of research on the social construction of fear, I argue that one reason crime is so popular is that it is almost always linked to “fear,” the most basic feature of entertainment in popular culture. This emphasis has produced a *discourse of fear*: the pervasive communication, symbolic awareness, and expectation that danger and risk are a central feature of everyday life. The discourse of fear has important consequences for social policy, public perceptions of social issues, the demise of public space, citizens who are becoming more “armed” and “armored,” and the promotion of a new social identity—the victim—that has been exploited by numerous claims-makers, including politicians, who promote their own propaganda about national and international politics.

Crime news has been a staple of journalism for decades. For many years newspapers emphasized sensational and even erotic aspects of homicides and brutal assaults, sex crimes, and kidnappings. This emphasis became rationalized with the emergence of movie “newsreels” as well as television news and the ability to “see” crime scenes, victims, and the accused. Today, a pervasive mass-mediated popular culture virtually engulfs everyday life. In another age, there was the mass media and there was reality; in our age, there is popular culture—everywhere—and even “reality” is presented to us as entertainment programming. In the U.S., for example, dozens of “reality” television programs are about crime and “crime fighting,” as caricatures of criminals and police officers are presented back-to-back with sexually evocative images of people roaming “remote islands” in search of love, treasure, and security.

Running through all this programming is the commercially inspired entertainment format. As suggested by Robert Snow’s analysis of “media culture,”² the entertainment format emphasizes: first, an absence of the ordinary; second, the openness of an adventure, outside the boundaries of routine behavior; third, a suspension of disbelief by the audience member. In addition, while the exact outcome may be in

² Robert P. Snow, *Creating Media Culture* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1983).

doubt, there is a clear and unambiguous point at which it will be resolved. Packaging such emphases within dramatic formats (visual, brief, and action-oriented) produces an exciting and familiar tempo to audiences. Moreover, as audiences spend more time with these formats, the logic of advertising, entertainment, and popular culture becomes taken-for-granted as a “normal form” of communication.

There are two reasons why crime is so prevalent in American television, and increasingly, throughout the world. First, crime is connected to fear, a staple of the entertainment format. Second, crime is very easy to cover and therefore fits well with the scheduling and personnel constraints of local television. As one vice president of several local stations pointed out, “covering crime is the easiest, fastest, cheapest, most efficient kind of news coverage for TV stations. News directors and station owners love crime.”³ A clear bias of this coverage is that those crimes that occur very rarely—homicides and brutal physical assaults—receive the majority of coverage, while those crimes that are more likely to occur—theft and burglary—are seldom mentioned. One consequence of this coverage is to give viewers (and readers) the sense that “crime” means “violent crime.” There is strong evidence that this perception of the “crime problem” contributes to voter support for “tough crime legislation,” including mandatory sentencing, “three strikes and you’re out,” as well as capital punishment.

Numerous studies of crime reporting stress how pervasive crime and danger are in American news media, especially television. Crime reports make up 25–35% of news in some local markets. Consider the following statistics concerning local news coverage:

...one has to add up all the educators, school board members, city council members, mayors, state agency officials, state legislators, governors, members of Congress and all other local elected and appointed officials combined just to match the number of criminals and suspects on screen...

³ Grossman 21.

- Forty percent of the stories last 30 seconds or less.
- One in four stories is about crime, law or courts.
- Less than 1 percent of stories could be called “investigative.”
- Health stories outnumber all other social issues by 32 percent.
- There are as many stories about the bizarre (8 percent) as there are about civic institutions.

...Poverty, welfare, and homelessness are all but absent in local news. Out of the nearly 6000 stories studied, only nine dealt with these topics, not enough to even register a single percentage point.

...A recent report from the National Endowment for the Arts found that citizens spend more money each year attending performing-arts events than either the movies or professional sports.

Yet on local TV news, the arts and culture are almost invisible, accounting for just 24 stories—again, less than one percent of the total studied.

Who are the people shown in local TV news stories? After criminals and suspects (who make up 10 percent of all people on screen) the next most common group featured is crime victims or their families (9 percent).

...Crime is the perennial No. 1 topic, in large markets and small, but in the largest markets stations are most likely to pad their crime coverage with tales of mayhem from distant places.⁴

⁴ Lee Ann Brady and Atiba Pertilla, “The Look of Local News,” Local TV News Project 2001: <www.journalism.org/resources/research/reports/localTV/2001/look.asp>.

The major television networks in the United States tend not to present a lot of crime news since crime is usually “local.” Yet, there has been a remarkable increase in the amount of violent crime news presented on network television. Indeed, in recent years journalism has begun to take a look at the impact of such distorted coverage about crime and fear on American life. Two journalists who are very critical of the news coverage of crime observe: “In 1997, even as the prison population was going up and the crime rate was falling the public rated ‘crime/gangs/justice system’ as ‘the most important problem facing the country today’—and by a large margin.”⁵ Chronicling the preoccupation with crime by local newspapers and television broadcasters in promoting a fear of crime agenda, the authors observe the culpability of national and prestigious news outlets in pushing the same views, including television network news:

The Center for Media and Public Affairs reported in April 1998 that the national murder rate has fallen by 20% since 1990—but the number of murder stories on network newscasts rose in the same years by about 600%...not including the many broadcasts of or about the O. J. Simpson trial.⁶

Fear and Crime

In a recent book, *Creating Fear: News and the Construction of Crisis*, I tracked the nature and extent of the use of the word “fear” in major newspapers from 1987 to 1996 and examined ABC news coverage for several years. This project was informed by numerous studies and insights by criminologists and media scholars, particularly the conceptual development of a model—the “problem frame”—of how

⁵ Wallace Westfeldt and Tom Wicker, *Indictment: The News Media and the Criminal Justice System* (Nashville: First Amendment Center, 1998) 46.

⁶ Westfeldt and Wicker 2.

⁷ David L. Altheide, “The News Media, The Problem Frame, and the Production of Fear,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 38 (1997): 646–68.

entertainment inspires news reports about fear.⁷ The basic findings were that use of the word “fear” increased substantially—often 100% in stories as well as headlines, peaking around 1994. This usage also “traveled” across various topics over time, meaning, for example, that at one point fear was closely associated with AIDS, while a few years later it was associated with gangs or violence. Two terms closely associated with fear in the 1990s were children and schools. Numerous news reports about fear pertain to children.⁸ The news media’s emphasis of fear associated with children is consistent with work by Warr and others on the significance of “third-person” or “altruistic fear”—the concern for those whom you love or for whom you are responsible. Specifically, Warr found that children are the most common object of fear in households.⁹ Much of this concern is generated around crime and drugs. Such media-fanned fears promote more fear communication and control by authorities. The latest example is the “Amber Alert” program, which has been adopted by most states in the U.S., as well as federal legislation. Named after Amber Hagerman, who was kidnapped and killed in 1997, Amber Alerts are public messages that are broadcast on radio, television, and freeway signs, that a child has been abducted.

While the words and topics associated with fear vary over time, words and topics previously associated with fear do not lose their connotation of fear. Rather, analysis suggests that words used frequently together in public discourse may become “meaningfully joined” as sign and signifier, as connotation and denotation, so that, over time, it becomes redundant—and unnecessary—to use “fear” with, for example, violence, crime, gangs, and drugs: the specific word itself implies fear. The rationale for this approach is that the meaning of two words is suggested by their proximity, their association. Indeed, over time, terms merge in public discourse. Consider the example of “violence” and “crime” in the following three sentences:

⁸ David L. Altheide, “Children and the Discourse of Fear,” *Symbolic Interaction* 25.2 (2002): 229–50.

⁹ Mark Warr, “Altruistic Fear of Victimization in Households,” *Social Science Quarterly* 73.4 (December 1992): 723–36.

1. "An act of violence that might be regarded as a crime occurred Saturday night."
2. "A violent crime occurred Saturday night."
3. "A crime [understood as "violent crime"] occurred Saturday night."

The first sentence treats both "violence" and "crime" as nouns, as separate, but perhaps related. In the second sentence, "violence" becomes an adjective for "crime," part of its description and meaning. The third sentence shows what happens when terms are continually used together, often merging. This sentence suggests that "crime" has incorporated "violence" into its meaning, and the word "violent" need not be used. As the audience becomes more familiar with the meaning of the term and the context of its use, it becomes redundant to state "violent crime" since the mass mediated experience suggests that "crime is violent" (despite research to the contrary, e.g., most crimes are property crimes). Other work in cultural studies, deconstruction, and semiotics has demonstrated how this happens with numerous social problems and issues.¹⁰ Not only is the event distorted by this coupling, but our capacity to deal with it in different ways may be compromised. A similar coupling occurs when television reports about crime and violence show individuals of certain racial and ethnic groups. Television visual formats can contribute to social definitions. Conversely, coupling may not occur between words and topics if they have traditionally been viewed as quite separate. There is reason to suspect that this is part of the difficulty in convincing people that domestic violence is "really violence," and also a "crime." The notions of "family" and "crime" and "violence" have seldom appeared within close proximity in routine news reports until fairly recently.

¹⁰ Peter K. Manning and Betsy Cullum-Swan, "Narrative, Content and Semiotic Analysis," *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Newbury Park: Sage, 1994) 463–78.

Social Consequences of the Discourse of Fear

The evidence is quite strong that mass media reports about topics inform public opinion and contribute in no small way to setting social and political agendas.¹¹ As Warr notes: "...like criminal victimization itself, the consequences of fear are real, measurable, and potentially severe, both at an individual and social level.¹² Some researchers ask whether news reports can "cause" or "lead" people to focus on and fear crime, including the extent to which relevant values and perspectives may be "cultivated."¹³ From this perspective, the mass media play a large role in shaping public agendas by influencing *what* people think about.¹⁴ While there is scant data on "fear" per se among public opinion polls, most measures of fear in recent years are associated with crime. Chiricos, Padgett, and Gertz note: "With regard to fear, the most consequential of those messages are received from local news, and the volume of crime stories in that medium has achieved proportions that concern many critics."¹⁵

As noted previously, numerous public opinion polls show that fear of crime and personal safety reign above most other concerns. Indeed, many Americans feel that their lives are unsafe and more subject to harm than at previous times.¹⁶ Crime coverage contributes to perceptions of danger and the emergence of the discourse of fear. Kenneth F. Ferraro suggested the concept "perceptual criminology," or the notion

¹¹ Steven Chermak, *Victims in the News: Crime and the American News Media* (Boulder: Westview, 1995); Ted Chiricos, Sarah Eschholz, and Marc Gertz, "Crime, News and Fear of Crime: Toward an Identification of Audience Effects," *Social Problems* 44.3 (1997): 342–57; Ted Chiricos, Kathy Padgett, and Marc Gertz, "Fear, TV News, and the Reality of Crime," *Criminology* 38.3 (2000): 755–85.

¹² Mark Warr, "Fear of Rape Among Urban Women," *Social Problems* 32.3 (1985): 238.

¹³ G. Gerbner, L. Gross, M. Morgan, N. Signorelli, and M. Jackson-Beeck. "Cultural Indicators: Violence Profile No. 9," *Journal of Communication* 28 (1978): 176–207.

¹⁴ D. L. Shaw and M. E. McCombs, *The Agenda-Setting Function of the Press* (St. Paul: West, 1977).

¹⁵ Chiricos, Padgett, and Gertz, 780.

¹⁶ Ray Surette, *Media, Crime and Criminal Justice: Images and Realities* (Pacific Grove: Brooks/Cole, 1992).

that “many of the problems associated with crime, including fear, are independent of actual victimization...because it may lead to decreased social integration, out-migration, restriction of activities, added security costs, and avoidance behaviors.”¹⁷

Researchers have argued for decades that such concerns are connected to the mass media coverage of news as well as entertainment. For many people, the mass media in general, and the news media in particular, are a “window” on the world. How the public views issues and problems is related to the mass media, although researchers disagree about the nature of this relationship. This is particularly apparent when fear is associated with popular topics like crime, violence, drugs, and gangs. What audiences perceive as a “crime problem” is a feature of popular culture and an ecology of communication. Mapping how fear has become associated with different topics over time can clarify how the mass media and popular culture influence public perceptions of danger and risk. Indeed, Surette’s “social ecology of crime” model suggests that the “world of TV entertainment” resembles “citizen-sheep” being protected from “predator wolves—criminals” by “sheep dogs—police.”¹⁸

Several projects have suggested that the media do contribute to political agendas as well as people’s perceptions and interests in everyday life. Iyengar and Kinder employed an experimental design to demonstrate: “...that television news shapes the relative importance Americans attach to various national problems.”¹⁹ Focusing on energy, inflation, and unemployment, they argued that television is most powerful at “priming” or providing accessible bits of information, which viewers may draw on to help interpret other events. Making it clear that ultimately it is the viewers’ perceptions and everyday life experiences that help interpret social life, nevertheless, television contributes: “By priming

¹⁷ Kenneth F. Ferraro, *Fear of Crime: Interpreting Victimization Risk* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

¹⁸ Surette 43.

¹⁹ Shanto Iyengar and Donald M. Kinder, *News that Matters* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987) 113.

certain aspects of national life while ignoring others, television news sets the terms by which political judgments are rendered and political choices made.”²⁰ In other work Iyengar suggests that the priming and framing of reports as either “episodic”—focusing on individual circumstances and responsibility—or thematic—contextual and societal responsibility—has a bearing on what viewers take from television news reports.²¹

Other work has shown that fear is informed by perceived membership. Crime and threats to the public order—and therefore all good citizens—are committed by the “other,” the outsider, the non-member, the alien. Schwalbe and his colleagues have shown that “othering” is part of a social process whereby a dominant group defines into existence an inferior group.²² 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, man-

²⁰ Iyengar and Kinder 4.

²¹ Shanto Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible?: How Television Frames Political Issues* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991). See, also, Richard V. Ericson, “Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues” (book review) *The American Journal of Sociology* 98.6 (May 1993): 1459–63.

²² Michael Schwalbe, Sandra Godwin, Daphne Holden, Douglas Schrock, Shealy Thompson, and Michele Wolkowicz, “Generic Processes in the Reproduction of Inequality: An Interactionist Analysis,” *Social Forces* 79.2 (2000): 419–52.

age, and conjure emotions, to regulate discourse is to regulate 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.²³

It is not fear of crime, then, that is most critical, but rather what this fear can expand into, what it can become. Many changes in social life suggest 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 (e.g., “big soled shoes”), carry mace and handguns, and take martial arts classes. 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 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 suggests that fear reproduces itself or becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.²⁴ 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.”

²³ Schwalbe et al., 433–4.

²⁴ Ferraro 12.

Another consequence of the nature and extent of crime reporting is that the discourse of fear becomes taken for granted as a description of reality. 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. 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.”²⁵ 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. 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.

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 television “reality programs” and crime dramas ripped from the front pages, that in turn provide us with templates for looking at everyday life. While the increase in “false reports” is one 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 audiences who play with the repetitive reports as

²⁵ Rachel Ochoa and Kelly Pearce, “‘Rape’ was a Hoax: School Tale a Cry for Help,” *The Arizona Republic* (18 August 1999): A1.

dramatic enactments of “fear and dread in our lives,” and to individual actors who seek roles that are accepted as legitimate “attention-getters” in order to accomplish favorable identity vis-à-vis particular audience members.

Research also shows that the news coverage of the attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001 brought out a lingering and pervasive preoccupation with fear that has been exploited by government officials seeking to expand social control and limit civil liberties. After all, fear—more than danger or risk—is a pervasive emotional orientation that calls for strong action against those responsible. The remedy usually involves state authorities taking more control. The terror attacks were presented, essentially, as a “crime story,” albeit a “big crime,” and language that was developed over two decades of crime reporting was applied to terrorism. President Bush said “it’s important for Americans to know that trafficking of drugs finances the world of terror, sustaining terrorists.” The fear focus provides more revenue for news organizations and related popular culture outlets (e.g., “America’s Most Wanted”), while giving police and law enforcement agencies more credibility and control. The audience participates through hoaxes of fear.

The massive number of news reports about terrorism and alleged links to anthrax mailings sparked numerous “hoaxes” in the United States and around the world. The postal service received nearly 16,000 anthrax reports, and investigated people who claimed to have mailed or received anthrax in letters.²⁶ Clayton Lee Waagner, a petty criminal and self-proclaimed “anti-abortion warrior,” is suspected of sending some 550 letters containing harmless white powder to abortion clinics with the letters “Army of God.”²⁷ While this zealot clearly intended to frighten and intimidate recipients, several dozen people around the world sent similar “harmless” letters, intended as “practical jokes,” to

²⁶ Associated Press, “A Nation Challenged: The False Alarms; Postal Service Is Kept Busy Tracking Down Anthrax Scares,” *The New York Times* (21 December 2001): B5.

²⁷ Bill Sloat and John F. Hagan, “Anthrax Hoax Suspect Jokes about Fugitive Days,” *The Plain Dealer* (7 December 2001): A1.

friends, co-workers, neighborhood foes, and news organizations. At least one postal worker has been indicted for scrawling a note on a package about anthrax in order to take advantage of the public's fear "to settle a score or to pull off a prank."²⁸ Several others claimed that they received anthrax filled letters. One Missouri woman, who initially claimed to have been sent a poisoned letter, admitted that she put flour and roach killer in the envelope, and then delivered it to police some 80 miles from her home.²⁹

Fear also makes us more compliant in seeking help or being "rescued" from formal agents of social control. This is very apparent with the rise of "victimization" as a status to be shared and enjoyed. Fear has become a perspective or orientation to the world, rather than a response to a particular situation or thing. Fear is one of the few things that Americans share. The discourse of fear is constructed through evocative entertainment formats that promote visual, emotional, and dramatic experience that can be vicariously lived, shared, and identified with by audience members. Fear has led to a sense or an identity that is held in common by many Americans—that we are all actual or potential victims. The sense that something has happened to us, could happen to us, or probably will happen to us connects the present moment with resentments and blame about the past, as well as anxieties about the future.

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. Often couching their "causes" as battles for "justice," moral entrepre-

²⁸ Associated Press B5.

²⁹ Tim Bryant, "Woman Admits Hoax Anthrax Letter She Got Was a Fake, F. B. I. Says," *St. Louis Post Dispatch* (28 November 2001): B4.

neers seek to promote new social definitions of right and wrong.³⁰ Victimhood is now a status, a position 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.

Moving Beyond the Lens of Fear

Continual news coverage about crime and mayhem gradually transforms public discourse into one of victimization and threat. Without minimizing the dangers of everyday life, we can speak of danger and risk rather than fear, except when it is warranted. It is possible to take more control of our social environment. Much of this action begins not with “cleaning up the streets” but with focusing on our symbolic environment, understanding how our meaning machines are operating, and trying to provide some options. A responsible news media will take action to move away from fear oriented info-tainment.

Recent changes (since 1997) in select journalistic organizations are encouraging. For example, the television station KVUE in Austin, Texas began following a different protocol for presenting crime stories. This station’s news management examined how crime news was being covered and agreed essentially with several decades of social science research that much of the coverage was sensational, dramatic, and had no social value whatsoever. Accordingly, they set forth five rules of thumb for covering crime news:

- Does action need to be taken?
- Is there an immediate threat to safety?
- Is there a threat to children?
- Does the crime have significant community impact?
- Does the story lend itself to a crime-prevention effort?

³⁰ See J. M. Johnson, “Horror Stories and the Construction of Child Abuse,” *Images of Issues*, ed. Joel Best (Hawthorne: Aldine de Gruyter, 1995) 17–31; and Malcolm Spector and John I. Kitsuse, *Constructing Social Problems* (Menlo Park: Cummings, 1977).

Many in the “industry” as well as newspaper writers criticized them for not presenting “all the news”! The strongest claim was that their ratings would fall and that people would switch channels to the traditional blood and guts that leads local television newscasts across the country. To KVUE’s credit—and perhaps their relief—the ratings have held and their new brand of television journalism has become more popular, at least to the extent that other stations across the country are talking about change.³¹

Conclusion

Crime news and fear influence national and international affairs. Fear is a key component of the entertainment format that has shaped news reports for several decades. This usage has intensified in the United States around certain topics such as crime and terrorism. I suggest that the U. S. military policy against Iraq was fueled by decades of crime reports and harsh efforts in pursuing the drug war. Citizens became accustomed to giving up civil liberties to surveillance and enforcement efforts by formal agents of social control (FASC). Numerous “crises” and fears involving crime, violence, and uncertainty were important for public definitions of the situation after 9/11. Government officials used the foundation of fear to build even more fear in the United States and to enact draconian legislation that has negated civil liberties. The drug war and ongoing concerns with crime led to the expansion of fear in relation to 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, which included a 2002 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.” Criminals and terrorists are now joined in popular culture narratives of evil, control, and conquest. The war on drugs increased our prison population 600% since 1970 and destroyed

³¹ Joe Holley, “Should the Coverage Fit the Crime? A Texas TV Station Tries to Resist the Allure of Mayhem,” *Columbia Journalism Review* 35.1 (May/June 1996): 27 ff.

numerous minority communities in the United States.³² The war on terrorism brought death and destruction to untold thousand of Iraqis. And still we receive messages promoting fear, asking for more security, promising more surveillance. Crime news has gone global. The American public and their legislators apparently accepted the Bush administration's trumpeting about the necessity of the various Patriot Acts, despite unprecedented violation of civil liberties at the expense of more surveillance and less law enforcement accountability.

As I concluded in *Creating Fear*, like agates that have been forged through time and pressure, fear accumulates and washes over the beaches of our experiences and social encounters. But unlike agates that enrich our lives, fears limit our lives and make us vulnerable to tyrants who would "save us."

³² Victor E. Kappeler, Mark Blmberg, and Gary W. Potter, *The Mythology of Crime and Criminal Justice* (Prospect Heights: Waveland, 2000) 261 ff.