KearnsFINAL

Tue, 5/11 8:28PM 57:23

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

terrorism, torture, perpetrator, people, media, mental illness, research, counterterrorism, frame, paper, hypotheses, findings, attack, muslim, mental health issues, perpetrated, support, question, news coverage, watched

SPEAKERS

Erin Kearns, Jenn Tostlebe, Jose Sanchez

Jenn Tostlebe 00:14

Hi, everyone! Welcome back to The Criminology Academy, where we are criminally academic. My name is Jenn Tostlebe.

J

Jose Sanchez 00:21

And I'm Jose Sanchez.

Jenn Tostlebe 00:23

and we are your hosts for this episode.

J

Jose Sanchez 00:25

In this episode we're speaking with Professor Erin Kearns about news and entertainment media coverage of terrorism and torture.

Jenn Tostlebe 00:32

Jenn Tostlebe 00:33

is currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Criminology & Criminal Justice at the University of Alabama. Starting in August 2021, she will join the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice and the National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education (NCITE) Center of Excellence at the University of Nebraska Omaha. Her primary research seeks to understand the relationship among terrorism, media, law enforcement, and the public. Her publications include articles on why groups lie about terrorism, media coverage of terrorism and counterterrorism, public perceptions of terrorism and counterterrorism practices, and relationships between communities and law enforcement. Thank you so much for joining us, Erin!

E Erin Kearns 01:16

Thank you so much for having me here. today. I'm really excited to speak with you both.

J Jose Sanchez 01:20

Okay. So before we get into it, just a brief overview of what we're going to be talking about today. We are going to ask you a few sort of broad questions about terrorism, and terrorism research, then we're going to get into a paper that you co-authored on the media and terrorism, and then finally, we are going to talk about some of your work with counterterrorism and the use of torture and public perceptions on the use of torture. And so with that being said, take it away, Jenn.

Jenn Tostlebe 01:52

Thanks, Jose. So Erin, our first question for you is this broad question of how is terrorism defined?

E Erin Kearns 02:00

And that is the million dollar question. So you know, I I often and I'm not the only one who probably makes this joke that if you asked, you know, a dozen terrorism experts how to define terrorism, you get at least two dozen answers. And part of the problem with the definition is that there is not one single definition that is used academically. We've debated and debated this, you know, this very, very question for decades. There's no one

definition that is used even within the United States, you know, from a legal standpoint. There is no charge for terrorism itself. So when we think about how to define this, while there is this debate and uncertainty, there are some core elements that are generally agreed upon. It's generally agreed upon that terrorism needs to be the threat or use of violence; that it needs to aim to cause fear or coerce a broader audience than just those who are directly impacted; that the motivation for it needs to be politically, economically, socially or religiously focused. Some of the things that we might quibble a little bit more on is whether the targets have to be civilians versus non combatants, which would mean perhaps people who are in uniform, but not actively engaged in official duties. So for example, the attack on the Marine barracks in Beirut back in 1982. We might also quibble about whether the perpetrators need to be sub-state actors or not. I will say in my research, because of this, what I and many other scholars do is that we tie our operating definition to the global terrorism databases data, because that is a external entity that has systematically collected and coded incidents or data about incident level, incident level data on terrorism for decades. And that is a I think, a sound way of tying our understanding of what terrorism is from research perspective to systematic publicly available data.

Jenn Tostlebe 03:57

Yeah, I feel like there's so many things that people think are just easy to define that end up just not being but that. That's good that there are these core elements that then at least researchers can draw off of.

J

Jose Sanchez 04:10

It's always interesting to me, because, you know, I do gang research. And, you know, we have debates over definitions all the time as well. And, you know, when I talk to, like my parents or family members, they are like, what do you mean you don't know what the definition for this thing is? It's like such an important thing. I'm like, yeah, I don't know. If I could answer that question, I would. But yeah, scholars define things a lot differently, at least with gang legislation. States define things differently. So it's just interesting that like we do have these things that seemed to be pretty important, but we don't have like concrete answers for, like, what is it?

E

Erin Kearns 04:56

And that's, I mean, such sort of the crux of the problem with much of what we study is that, you know, the members of the public like, Oh, I know what this is I can define what

terrorism is or isn't. It's like, well, no, that's not really how this works. You know, of course we study this and think about this in far more detail than the average person. But it can lead to a lot of misunderstandings about, you know, terrorism, crime, and violence more generally, and responses to it.

J Jose Sanchez 05:23

Yeah, we all love, "I know it when I see it." So speaking of this, so at least I think for our generation, terrorism really came to the forefront or really came to like the public consciousness for us, after 9/11. And so could you maybe talk to us a little bit about terrorism before 9/11? And if there was sort of like an increase in terror attacks post 9/11?

E Erin Kearns 05:53

That's great question. So we and again, I'm going to refer back to the global terrorism database, because they have been collecting these data since 1970. So we can look at some of these time trends, when we look at the number of terror attacks in the United States or globally, 9/11 didn't have this market increase in or really any increase that we can see in the frequency of terrorism. And that is, you know, I think, as you alluded to is is sort of runs counter to the assumption because obviously, 9/11 was such a sort of formative event in public consciousness over the last 20 years where we talked about and think about terrorism so much, presumuably more than we did before that. I think it's one of those really interesting examples of how then public awareness and actual data are at odds with one another.

Jenn Tostlebe 06:45

Yeah, I definitely would have thought that they increase just because that's what you hear about more. I mean, even recently, you know, I can think of multiple things that have been discussed, at least by the media as terror attacks. Alright, so then, what are the main causes of terrorism?

E Erin Kearns 07:02

I'm gonna paint with a very, very broad brush here. Because it is, and this is something that we do know a lot more than we did. And did, pre 9/11. And there certainly were scholars who were studying terrorism before 9/11. You know, there's been market increase in that sense, of course. We think about what causes terrorism there are, you know, strategic rational reasons, why groups or individuals use terrorism to try to further some

goal. So this partially has this, you know, rational reason for terrorism as a means to an end, really, there are some psychological processes that are connected potentially with increased likelihood of perpetrating terrorism. A lot of it comes though from societal social context, as well. So what else is going on in broader society? What an individual's their own existing social networks look like in pushing people or pulling people from groups that are engaging in violence, including terrorism? So it's complicated?

Jenn Tostlebe 08:05

Yes. I figured that would be the answer. But you know, it's one of those things that you have to ask.

E

Erin Kearns 08:12

Yeah, absolutely.

J

Jose Sanchez 08:14

Okay, so I guess now's a good time to start laying a little bit of the foundation as we start moving towards your paper that we'll be discussing. And can you describe the term media framing? Like, what is it and why does it have such a powerful impact?

E

Erin Kearns 08:32

Yeah, absolutely. And this is drawing from communications literature, and actually sort of is part and parcel with not just how media frame events, but how they agenda set as well. To Jenn's point, that you assume that there's more terrorism because you hear about it more. And that's the answer. The first component of media news media in particular, is contexts influence on public awareness is that first media agenda set and what they cover and what they don't. If media are covering a particular event or an issue more, people are more aware of it, it signals to the broader public, this is an important thing that we should pay attention to. And then once media decided to cover an event or an issue, how they cover that can vary quite dramatically and have huge impacts on public awareness. We think about this. I mean, you think of all of the anecdotal examples, flipping on an MSNBC clip and a FOX news clip discussing the same events, and they are framed in two dramatically different ways. In this context, thinking about terrorism, framing an event, you know, there's plenty of violent events that get news coverage. We can think of, you know, a number within the last few weeks unfortunately. How media describe the perpetrator, how they describe the event itself can also influence how people perceive

these events and can lead to people making assumptions and connections that aren't actually supported by data. Or by how we actually are thinking about terrorism in this example.

Jenn Tostlebe 10:07

So then using that and getting more into these media depictions of terrorism and its perpetrators, in what ways do media represent or even misrepresent terrorism as it's actually unfolding, as the event is actually happening?

E

Erin Kearns 10:22

Absolutely, the biggest thing that, you know, we tend to notice is that their news media's job is to, you know, yes, inform people, but also keep people watching or listening or reading or whatever, you know, whatever format the media is being depicted in. And ultimately people want sort of answers. And in the immediate aftermath, particularly of larger scale events, the question, really, you know, the quick questions or, you know, who did it? Why did they do it? Is this terrorism? Who's responsible? And those are things that in reality, take time to understand you have to do investigations, this can take days, weeks, months to have actual evidence based answers. But media need to cover it right at that moment. So there tends to be I mean, the the number of times that I heard listening to think of CNN in grad school, when there was an event that happens, [the media is like] like, well, we shouldn't speculate, but if... You just say you shouldn't speculate. But then they report on speculating because it's, it's just, you know, it's different pushes and pulls. So I wanted to be really careful. Like, this is not about like, fake news, quote unquote, or anything of that nature. That's not what I'm talking about here. What I'm talking about is how media depict things that are actually happening and how slight shifts and framing can potentially influence how public, the public perceives of terrorism, among other issues.

Jenn Tostlebe 11:49

So this is kind of a question that Jose and I are really interested in because we're close to the event that just happened. So we're talking about the Boulder, Colorado shooting that happened, what a few weeks ago [at King Soopers, 2021]. And it's funny, because you just said, you know, you shouldn't speculate, but we're kind of going to ask you somewhat to. And it's okay if you don't want to, but we're kind of so when we were thinking about this, you know, when the Boulder shooting was actually occurring, there was a lot of discussion around mental illness and white privilege, since it was assumed that the perpetrator of the event was white. All of a sudden, it came out that he had a Muslim sounding name and

was Muslim. And the conversation, you know, briefly switched to this discussion of terrorism. But still, like now, mental illness really seems to remain like the dominant storyline amongst the media. Can you talk about our speculate why you think the terrorism narrative didn't predominate or isn't currently predominating.

E Erin Kearns 12:52

So I like as an optimistic take, which I'm usually much more of a realist. An optimistic take is that as there's been more discussion of the importance of how media frame violent events, they are more hesitant to just initially call something terrorism. That's what I hope. I think in reality and when we think about this discussion, and the the sort of what had been for a long time, the conventional wisdom that if the perpetrator is Muslim, we call it terrorism. If the perpetrators white, we call it a function of mental illness. There's a couple issues with this, right? First, this perpetrator seems to be both, you know, to the extent that race and ethnicity aren't, their social constructs don't right, obviously, seems to be both white, or at least, would appear to be white if you are just looking to add a picture, perhaps, and also Muslim, like those two things can coexist. And that I mean, thankfully, because there aren't that actual many terrorist attacks in the US in any given time period, there really aren't very many perpetrators who actually have been both white and Muslim to be able to sort of see how the interplay of those two identities can influence news coverage. What we do see if we separate this out though, is that you know that there there is this implicit association between Islam and terrorism, in media coverage and in public perceptions. And this idea, in part almost certainly stems from from 9/11. And that being such a salient attack, there's also elements of social identity theory and in-groups and out-groups, and the majority of the US public are white and non-Muslim. So it's it's easier to view that threats come from a group that is not like someone than one's own in-group.

J Jose Sanchez 14:43

Yeah, it's I think it's an interesting discussion to have, especially this morning. I was actually reading an article where they were talking: well, technically, if you're going by, like, like US definitions, the Census, like he is white, but he's also Muslim, so how do we...? They were trying to get it, you know, people were like, well, white men can be terrorists too. They were trying to reconcile like this, like, I guess legally, he's white, but he's also Muslim.

E Erin Kearns 15:21

And neither of these things should matter and how we define the attacks, you know,

define the event itself, and the motivations behind it for whether it is and that is how that is how events get included in the global terrorism database, it doesn't matter the perpetrators race, ethnicity, religion. It's what is the motivation for the event? In terms of how do we rectify this with public awareness and consciousness? It's a much bigger question that I have spent years trying to figure out and will probably spend the rest of my career trying to figure out. And it becomes much, much more challenging because there is just it's what people don't know, these associations, these inaccurate associations between Islam and terrorism, you know, are pervasive. And there's, we see this both from the media coverage side of things like the paper that we'll be talking about a little bit, as well as other research that has looked at media coverage and framing of terrorism. And we're not the only ones who've done it, certainly. And from the public perception side of things, you know, from survey research, looking at associations; from experimental research, various perpetrator identity and asks people, how they perceive of the event. It's pervasive and how do we correct that? This is, again, is a big question that I have a lot more ideas for research projects on that I have answers for.

Jenn Tostlebe 16:43

We believe in you, you can get to the heart of it. Cuz yeah, it is really big question, but it's an important one.

J

Jose Sanchez 16:50

Okay, so I guess now's as good a time as any to move into your paper. So the paper was authored by our guest Erin Kearns and her co authors, Allison Betus and Anthony Lemieux. The paper is titled "How perpetrator identity (sometimes) influences media framing attacks as 'terrorism' or 'mental illness." The paper was published in 2020 in Communications Research. In this paper, Professor Kearns and her colleagues systematically examine when terrorism is referenced and when mental illness is referenced in media coverage of terror attacks, and whether there is variation based on perpetrator identity. This is done by examining the text of print news coverage of all terrorist attacks listed in the Global Terrorism Databased which occurred in the United States between 2006 and 2015. Specifically, the main research question is: In media coverage of terror attacks, when is terrorism referenced and when is mental illness referenced? Is that a fair representation of your paper?

E

Erin Kearns 17:59

It sure is.

J

Jose Sanchez 18:01

Perfect. So our first question, and this is one that we always like to start with is sort of what was the impetus behind writing this paper?

E

Erin Kearns 18:10

This is a great question. So the initial idea for this paper came about January, I want to say January, so of 2017 was right after former President Trump was inaugurated, and he made some boneheaded comment about how, you know, there are more terrorist attacks [?] Muslims. And that's what's not getting covered. And this is one of the you know, that any terrorism researchers like yeah, that's not the problem, you know, that there was this implicit sort of assumption that, you know, what we were examining this paper, that there's this, we all sort of assumed that media were more likely to cover and frame attacks as terrorism when the perpetrators were Muslim. They started really as a lunch room conversation, we realized that while this is had been viewed as sort of conventional wisdom, both amongst terrorism researchers and amongst the broader public, or at least segments of the broader public, there hadn't been any systematic studies actually evaluating this. There are certainly some, you know, formative studies in the years right after 9/11 that looked at subsets of cases. So you're looking at, say, 11 attacks and seeing how those individual attacks are framed. But the thing that still didn't allow us to answer is how is this systematically across all attacks in a particular country during a particular time period? And might it be something about these subset of cases that have been used in prior research that were influencing the findings? So we set out to look at, as I said, the global terrorism database over this 10 year period, and partially we stopped in 2015, because that's the extent of the global terrorism database that was available at the time we did this project started this project, and then we went back 10 years, which was a nice even number. Also 2006 was the point at which smartphones came out people were using In the internet Far, far more for lots of things, including getting news, we assumed that that might be a time period where you would see shifts in the amount of news coverage, because there aren't page limits on the internet like there are on actual hardcopy newspapers. So we started with just, you know, looking for the actual print news coverage. In doing that, it became really apparent really quickly, that there were also these massive differences in how much various attacks were being framed. And that was the foundation of a related piece that we published in Justice Quarterly in 2018 or 2019, I forget. And then this was looking more at the framing questions. So it was really sort of a two part project.

Jenn Tostlebe 20:43

So then, related to that initial question, why is it important to understand how perpetrator

identity influences media references to terrorism or to mental illness?

E Erin Kearns 20:56

The biggest influence or importance here is that this can shape how the general public thinks about threats. And we see, you know, we see this play out in real time, where, since 9/11, there has been this over focus on terrorism, this association between Islam and terrorism, to the point that the broader public, law enforcement agencies, etc, have been less willing to see threats from other groups, particularly far right extremist groups in the United States, which is no question in the last few years have played a huge role. But it's not something that is new in the data, really, we can go back look at data over from 2006 onward, far right extremists were perpetrating the majority of the terrorist attacks in the United States, it's just that that's not what media was covering, that's not what people were aware of and associating with terrorism. Which is, you know, can really blind us, you know, both as society and as people who are looking to counter this sort of violence, to what, you know, the real sort of threat landscape and of, you know, variety of different potential threats looks like,

Jenn Tostlebe 22:04

And even then how to solve this issue. Being very optimistic.

J Jose Sanchez 22:10

So you have a nifty setup for this paper. And the main section of the framing of your study is split up into four distinct parts. Each one has its own theoretical framing and prior research to set up hypotheses. And so the way we want to do it is, we want to talk to you about each part, individually.

J Jose Sanchez 22:32

And so we'll start with part one, which is race and religion. And so, based on prior research, Western media disproportionately describes violence perpetrated by Muslims as terrorism, going so far as to associate terrorism as a quote unquote, Muslim problem. When it comes to white perpetrators, people are less likely to view them as terrorists, and are instead more willing to find alternative explanations for their behavior, such as mental illness. So based on this, can you describe your hypothesis on race and religion?

E Erin Kearns 23:07

So the hypotheses on race and religion, I think, is importantly, making two distinctions. One of which we've already talked about is that a perpetrator can be white, or not white, Muslim, or not Muslim, they can be white and Muslim, white but not Muslim, Muslim but not white, or neither of these. So in the public discourse about this, it tends to dichotomize it as white or Muslim. It's like, no, no, there's more options than that. So really separating out the hypotheses in that way is really important. There's also in the public discourse on this assumption that attacks are framed either as terrorism or as the result of mental illness without acknowledging that those two things can both be framed in the same article covering the same attack, or there's coverage of terrorist attacks that don't reference either of those two. So really separating this out and trying to drill down more systematically, and in a more methodologically sound way on what the mechanisms are here, as it relates, you know, through testing the conventional wisdom, I guess, is the way to say it.

J Jose Sanchez 24:14

And can you So, give us what your findings were for the hypothesis?

E Erin Kearns 24:19

Sure. Yeah, absolutely. So we found that coverage of attacks where the perpetrator was Muslim, those articles were dramatically more likely to frame an attack as terrorism, as compared to attacks with the perpetrator was not Muslim. Contrary to expectation, whether or not the perpetrator is white, has no bearing on the likelihood that articles covering the attack will be will frame that attack as a result of mental illness or not.

Jenn Tostlebe 24:50

Yeah, it's interesting. It's like the public discourse is right in one way, but not in the other way.

E Erin Kearns 24:55

Yes, yeah, absolutely.

E Erin Kearns 24:57

And I should also note that, you know, understanding the public interests of this research,

we ran, I estimated these models, hundreds of different ways. Hundreds of different ways of potentially operationalizing different variables of including other potential control variables. Really like I kind of joke like we almost tried like reverse p-hack this to be like, is there any way that we can find different results? And we don't. Except for what is described in the paper where there's a little bit about how we conceptualize whether the perpetrator actually has a mental health issue.

Jenn Tostlebe 25:39

Yeah, and you to kind of go to your methods from looking at this print media. I mean, there were multiple people on the paper who examined each article, right? Or two?

Jenn Tostlebe 25:51

And then drawing out specific keywords.

E

Erin Kearns 25:51

Yes.

E

Erin Kearns 25:54

Yes.

Jenn Tostlebe 25:55

So you had, you know, you had a method for how you were looking at these articles and putting them into your data.

E

Erin Kearns 26:01

Yes, incredibly systematic. We officially say that everything was fully double coded and any disagreements were agreed upon. In practice, everything was looked at more like four or five, six times. Really, with the eye that, you know, because of the importance of this, and because of the public interest towards it, we are much much more concerned about getting it right than we were about having, you know, a finding that would get published.

Jenn Tostlebe 26:27

Yeah, absolutely. Okay. So the second part of your paper was looking at like larger organizations versus a lone individual as a perpetrator. And so kind of to summarize this section, the literature and prior research, relative to a lone individual research had found that Americans are more likely to label and attack as terrorism if the perpetrators are part of a larger organization. And so, going off of that, can you elaborate a little on that and what your hypotheses were regarding whether an attack was associated with a known terrorist group?

E Erin Kearns 27:05

Sure. I mean, our expectation, particularly when there, you know, when there's violence, there's sometimes this ambiguity about whether it's terrorism or not. If we know that the perpetrators are a member of or associated with a known group, and whether that be, you know, Al Qaeda or ISIS, or whether that be a group like Sovereign Citizens or the Earth Liberation Front, that association with a known group that perpetrates terrorism, should and does increase the likelihood that media frame that attack as being terrorism, and decreases the likelihood that media are referencing mental health issues. And the argument there is mostly thinking that the perpetrators are part of a larger group, it's easier to sort of categorize this as, as terrorism, there doesn't need to be the speculation about causes where mental health issues might get thrown into the mix. There's also perhaps the assumptions that somebody who has mental health issues are not going to be able to be part of, you know, a group plot. Now, that's not necessarily the case. And you know, the the really the actual research looking at relationships between mental health or mental illness and perpetration of terrorism, you know this is not a causal pathway, right, the research, there's much, much more complex.

Jenn Tostlebe 28:23

And then going off of those hypotheses, what what did you end up finding?

E Erin Kearns 28:27

So we found that, you know, if the perpetrators are part of a known group that media are dramatically more likely to frame the attack as being terrorism. And if perpetrators are permanent, that they're also less likely to frame that attack as being a result of mental illness, which is what we expected.

J Jose Sanchez 28:47

Okay, and so part three deals with mental illness. And so the research finds that the public is less likely to consider perpetrators to be terrorists, when they have a documented mental health issue. However, even if there is evidence of a valid diagnosis, the media often uses family history or non clinical terms such as, quote unquote, crazy or maniac to refer to the perpetrator. Can you give us your hypotheses for the mental illness section?

E Erin Kearns 29:19

Sure. So we were really looking at this and I will I want to really be very, very careful and caveating, you know, that this is, we're not in any way trying to imply that there is a relationship between mental illness and perpetration of terrorism. Really, what we're expecting here is that, you know, media coverage of an attack will be less likely to reference terrorism when the perpetrator has a mental illness, and will be more likely to reference mental illness when the perpetrator has a mental illness, which still can lead to stigmatization of mental health issues. But that at least is a reflection of some actual part of the perpetrator potentially. So we are expecting, in short, basically, if the perpetrator has a documented mental health issue, media will be less likely to reference terrorism more likely reference mental health issues.

E Erin Kearns 29:23

And was there support for this hypothesis?

E Erin Kearns 29:46

So we thought about how we measured, how we measure mental known mental health issues a couple of different ways. And that's just again, thinking about, you know, this is we don't have perfect data here, right? So we thought, we used this really strict coding where there is a confirmed diagnose, the person has confirmed to diagnose mental health issue that was discussed in media, and then [a second way of coding] more loosely where the perpetrator is, it's been speculated, perhaps with interviews with family or friends, that there might that the picture might have some suffering from some sort of mental health issue. And we found with a looser way of coding this, that media were less likely to frame the attack as terrorism, but we did not find significant results when we use the more strict coding.

Jenn Tostlebe 30:56

I thought that was really interesting that you've broken up because that I mean, when I think of media, there is definitely that differentiation. And I'm interested in mental health and physical health. And so I really liked that you pulled that apart more than just the media is talking about it in general.

E Erin Kearns 31:14

Thank you. Yeah. And we and we thought about this, you know, in different ways as well, when we're thinking about testing the hypothesis about media references to mental illness in the coverage is that we also needed to think about, you know, whether or not the perpetrator is known or not, because contrary to what a lot of people assume most terrorist attacks, we don't actually know the individual or individuals who perpetrated it. So obviously, if we don't know who perpetrated it, it makes it much more difficult to identify, we can't know anything about their mental condition. We don't know anything about them.

Jenn Tostlebe 31:45

Yeah, that blew my mind. What What was it like 60% of terrorists terror attacks, you don't know the perpetrator? Or is it the opposite?

E Erin Kearns 31:53

So in the United States, oh, gosh, you're putting me on the spot here.

Jenn Tostlebe 31:57

Sorry.

E Erin Kearns 31:58

It's in the paper. And like if I do this, so if we look at this globally, only about 12% of terrorist attacks globally have been claimed by a perpetrator. And that doesn't mean necessarily mean that like, you know, John Smith was the perpetrator, it means that the group claimed it generally. Which is again, so thinking and that's a whole different sort of part of my research, looking at how groups how why groups lie about this and why that matters. But in the United States? Uh, oh, gosh, I really...

Jenn Tostlebe 32:30

It's okay if you don't want to throw something out.

E Erin Kearns 32:32

I don't, I don't remember off the top of my head.

Jenn Tostlebe 32:34

Yeah, I know, I just put...

E Erin Kearns 32:35

About half, half-ish.

Jenn Tostlebe 32:37

Okay. I know, it's in the paper that we're talking about, if I remember right, either that one or the other one that you referenced earlier. Both of which we're putting on our website. So if people are curious, go reference that.

Jenn Tostlebe 32:50

Okay, so then part four, which was the kind of last hypotheses like main hypothesis, part of your paper [which is] on casualties. And so based off of prior research, in theory, terrorist attacks with more casualties tend to receive more media coverage. Casualties, again, aren't necessary for an attack to be considered terrorism. But the more fatalities there are, the more likely members of the public will classify the attack as terrorism. As far as I'm aware, and as you stated in the paper, there are currently no theoretical expectations for how casualties would impact references to mental illness. Correct?

E Erin Kearns 33:32

[Yeah] You know, we struggle and really thought about this quite a bit.

Jenn Tostlebe 33:35

Okay. So then what are are what were your hypotheses or hypothesis for the fatality aspect of attacks?

E Erin Kearns 33:44

So we expected that as an attack has more fatalities, media should be more likely to reference terrorism because of this implicit, sort of these implicit associations, again, that you know, that anything that is terrorrising is terrorism. Not saying that that's the case. But there tends to be sort of an assumption that if a lot of people are killed, then it must be terrorism. And so we expected to find that, again, to our findings, there really, you know, depend on how we specify our models, and whether or not we are including the model specification about how we code mental illness, influences whether or not this variable is significant in explaining framing of terrorism. And there was again, model specification actually also matters in whether or not media were more or less likely to frame the attack as a result of mental illness. So not super robust findings here.

Jenn Tostlebe 34:43

Yeah. That's interesting, because yeah, I would definitely assume what you hypothesized.

J Jose Sanchez 34:50

Yeah. So to summarize, and please feel free to correct me if I'm wrong here. The main findings from your paper is coverage of Muslim perpetrated attacks were more likely to reference terrorism. While there was no difference in references to mental illness between attacks perpetrated by white people and people of color.

E Erin Kearns 35:13

Yeah, yeah, that's the crux of the findings. And I think really taking taking the findings of this study, along with our prior study that's published in justice quarterly, is the finding that, you know, Muslim perpetrated terror attacks in the United States receive dramatically more coverage. So it's not just that that is, you know, the agenda setting piece that people are more aware of that because there's more news coverage of those attacks. But in that coverage, it's also much, much more likely that the coverage itself will label the attack or frame the attack as terrorism. So it's this compounding effect that media coverage of terrorism can have in potentially furthering this incorrect association between Islam and terror.

Jose Sanchez 36:01

So you had mentioned earlier, that it is possible to have this framing of terrorism and mental illness within one act, right? But we often see sort of like this dichotomy between the two, why does does it get sort of dichotomize that instead of having that be interinterrelated?

Erin Kearns 36:23

So I think like, the greatest example of this is Dylann Roof. Okay, so Dylann Roof, there's by any definition of terrorism that any expert is going to throw out there, Dylann Roof's attack at the church in Charleston was terrorism. There was a debate in the aftermath, like, do we frame, you know, he also has diagnosed mental health issues. So there was an actual large debate about this of, you know, do we frame this as a result of mental illness or terrorism? And reporters tend to kind of fall down on the side as well, now, let's talk about his mental illness. No, no, but it's terrorism too. Why I mean, this is going to just be pure speculation because we haven't really studied it. I don't know how to even sort of get out the why question here. But I think more than anything, it's just that we like simpler answers and simpler explanations. And, you know, particularly it's easier to just default to that. And I would assume that there are even though we didn't quite uncover them in this study, I assume there's some underlying biases in which frame gets labeled, at least in people's minds as a function of the perpetrators social identity.

Jenn Tostlebe 37:33

Simpler, is better, quote, unquote, better, but not necessarily, if you're trying to find the truth.

Erin Kearns 37:40

As criminologists we know that the simple explanations are always the right ones, right? Sarcasm for anyone who couldn't tell that.

Jose Sanchez 37:51

But I've seen this argument that so taking this reductionist approach to so just like mental illness, can be heavily problematic, right? We talked about this earlier that it can stigmatize mental illness. So just because someone has a diagnosis of bipolar or some type of what are they call? I'm blanking on on my psychology terms now. But that doesn't mean that they're just gonna go out like snap and go out and like shoot up a bunch of

people, right?

E Erin Kearns 38:19

Exactly. And this is where this is so problematic across the violence research, that this is not having a mental health issue is not a causal factor in perpetrating this kind of violence. There's even some evidence that being involved in a group uses terrorism can actually lead to mental health issues. And this is, you know, the nuances just amongst the public, there just isn't understanding is humongously problematic.

Jenn Tostlebe 38:47

I mean, I think that kind of comes down, at least to me, if I was to speculate kind of what you said, and I'm glad you brought up that being involved, in a terrorist group can lead to mental illness, or it's, you know, the research is starting to kind of uncover that, because I forgot that part. And I think that's important. But to me, it seems like you know, if you're exposed to violence and these extreme ideas that that can have a big impact on your health. And I don't know if that's kind of what the research is showing, or if there is research on that yet, but I would imagine that that would be the case.

E Erin Kearns 39:21

And this is something that, and I'll say I have it's been it's been a while since I've really dived deep enough into psychology research that I don't want to speak beyond what I am confident in, because I don't want to say anything that's going to further confusion in this question here.

Jenn Tostlebe 39:36

Definitely. Alright, so our last question when it comes to your paper is, you know, on the implications. Can you elaborate a little bit on the implications of the findings from your paper for like the academic community, but then also the public and then the political or policy spheres?

E Erin Kearns 39:55

Yeah, I mean, so from you know, from a research standpoint, I think really where I have really enjoyed in my research in the last four or five years is really diving more into these media effects and how this you know, we know the things and media frame the things

quite differently. And it doesn't really matter as much what we know if the vast majority of the public thinks that they, you know, watch Criminal Minds, and therefore know that profiling is real. So really trying to think about giving, I think that there's a lot of room particularly in our field where people do have an overinflated sense of knowledge. I think there's just a lot of room to really look at media depictions of many aspects of crime and try to understand more of these disconnects between data and public perceptions. In terms of the general public, I mean this is some of things that I think this was stemmed out of these projects that Alison, Tony, and I conducted an experimental study we're like, okay, we have factual information, can we get people to change their minds and put them more in line with factual information? And we cannot. At least not not in that study. People were, you know, we're plenty willing, it seemed to admit that factual information is in fact accurate. But when asked, but will you change your mind about it? No, no, we'll, hold off on that. So that's, you know, there's a lot of right, there's a lot of this. How do we frame these issues, to get the general public to really have a more holistic understanding of what the landscape is? And similarly with politicians, you know, if the only thing that we're, and thankfully, you know, this is not the case, particularly with the new administration, where there's actually from the federal level acknowledgement and funding and effort focusing on, you know, terrorism and counterterrorism, beyond just the, you know, the over focus on Islamic extremism. So I think that there is there is some hope in pushing this forward. So and on a completely depressing note.

J Jose Sanchez 41:50

I must confess, there was a time where I thought about joining the FBI, because I watched a few episodes of Criminal Minds.

E Erin Kearns 41:57

I think I think we've all had that, right?

Jenn Tostlebe 42:00

Definitely.

E Erin Kearns 42:02

I watched Criminal Minds before I went back to grad school. And there was definitely like, oh that looks cool. I wonder if it's a real thing. You know, it took about three days in a forensic psychology master's program to be like, oh...that is just media. That makes sense.

That's not real.

Jenn Tostlebe 42:16

I think the most disappointing thing is how fast everything seems to happen on TV, when it's like that is not even close to accurate.

E Erin Kearns 42:24

Yeah. And like, the actual analogous units, offices at the FBI are not like that. They do not have a private plane.

Jenn Tostlebe 42:34

Sadly.

E Erin Kearns 42:35

Yeah. That's just not how it works.

J Jose Sanchez 42:38

Wouldn't that be awesome, thought?

Jenn Tostlebe 42:41

Erin, is there anything else that you'd like to add about the paper that we were talking about?

E Erin Kearns 42:45

No, I think that that really covers it.

Jenn Tostlebe 42:48

Alright, so then let's move then into our third and final section for this episode, which is on torture and entertainment media. But a little bit more broad than that. But that's kind of where we'll focus. So you recently authored a book with Joseph Young titled "Tortured

logic: Why some Americans support the use of torture and counterterrorism." And so we're wanting to spend the last few minutes discussing this book that's really geared it seems toward understanding how and why citizens might come to support the use of torture techniques and counterterrorism.

E Erin Kearns 43:25

Yeah, so, just as uplifting as my other project. This is a series of projects. So Joe's, my advisor in my PhD, and the first paper that we, what became the chapter of a book, stemmed from a project that we were kicking around back in 2012/2013, where an actual, you know, General, and a number of interrogation professionals had actually traveled to Hollywood in 2007, trying to convince the producers of the TV show 24, and other Hollywood producers to stop showing torture work all the time, because that's not not only is it illegal and immoral, but it also is in practice in effective. And the actual real world generals and interrogation professionals had concern about the impact that these media depictions might be having on troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. So really, what would you know, started out is just really testing sort of that assumption of does seeing torture work in on TV actually increased people's support for it? And that's where we started with this. And we found initially just a sample of students that, yes seeing torture work made people more supportive, seeing torture fail did not decrease support, and seeing torture, regardless of whether it works or not, made people more likely to want to take action vis-à-vis signing a petition for Congress. And with this first study, it then led, you know, as is often the case to more and more and more questions, to the point that we wrote a whole book on it using a series of experiments.

Jenn Tostlebe 45:03

So the first question is more broad than the topic. And it's mainly because I'm not entirely sure what the answer is because I don't know that much about terrorism and counterterrorism. And so really based off of like a Google search that I did, counterterrorism is defined as political or military activities designed to prevent or thwart terrorism. First off, is that an accurate definition? And then what are some examples of counter terrorism?

E Erin Kearns 45:31

Yeah, I mean, so the terminology here also sort of shifts around, you know, over time, I think, broadly, is covering counterterrorism efforts, really, we can think about it more broadly, I think, really any sort of, you know, anything that is trying to combat and prevent

terrorist activity. In terms of, you know, this word as a part of this beyond the subtitle of our book, it's really just trying to, we wanted to really convey here more than anything is that we are talking about torture in this specific intel gathering context, trying to prevent terrorist attacks. Not about, you know, torture that a serial killer might inflict on his or her victims, and really trying to, you know, sort of limit the scope very clearly in the way that we're describing this.

J Jose Sanchez 46:19

So, experts have concluded, as you mentioned that torture is an effective. However, based on your book, it seems the same cannot be said for the public. What percentage of Americans believe that torture is acceptable for counterterrorism?

E Erin Kearns 46:36

This is a great question. And this is something that, you know, somewhat understandably, there weren't public opinion polls on support for torture really pre 9/11 because it's just the thing that we assumed that we didn't do because it's illegal and resigning and UN Convention Against Torture. It wasn't part of public sentiment, or sorry, public sort of not sentiment, but sort of, what didn't resonate with the public. So the public opinion polls on support for torture really started after the photos from Abu Ghraib in 2004 were released, and this became this hot button issue that members of public were debating. One of the biggest issues across any broad public opinion polling on torture, is that the wording of the questions themselves tend to presuppose that it's effective.

E Erin Kearns 47:24

You know, do you support it if it would prevent something? Not just saying, Do you support it? So in that context, it's a little it's difficult to assess what percentage of Americans support torture or think it can be acceptable in counterterrorism. And as we see consistently throughout the four experiments that are in the book, is that about a quarter of people have fluid views on torture, meaning that we can shift, you know, we can framing and how we manipulate the different conditions can make people typically more supportive of torture, it's a lot harder, it seems to constrain people's views. Whereas about three quarters of people have their views and the framing doesn't influence them. In some ways, it's hopeful, because we can really try to hopefully focus more of the efforts on that quarter or so who have fluid views on torture, but also a bit depressing as as is the theme here, in that it seems much easier to push people to be more supportive of torture, than it does to pull people's support and constraint.

Jenn Tostlebe 48:26

Out of the three quarters that are kind of stable in their viewpoints, were the majority of them supportive?

E Erin Kearns 48:33

It depended a lot on how we were framing the questions, there wasn't necessarily a fully consistent view there.

Jenn Tostlebe 48:39

Okay. So then, based on your research, kind of going exactly off of what you're talking about, what factors do influence public support for torture?

E Erin Kearns 48:51

Yeah so, I mean, certainly, you know, if it's, when it's stated that it will suit or imply that it will or is likely to work, people are more supportive of it, that ends justify the means piece. That there is, you know, depending on how we think about in-groups and out-groups can matter. So if torture is taking place domestically, people are less supportive of it, when it takes place in Afghanistan people are more supportive of it. If the person being tortured as a US citizen, there's less support for the practice versus a foreign national. And there's more nuance, of course, in the findings from chapter to chapter, but it really is one of the things that was really became really clear as we actually systematically were looking at how to push and pull support for torture is how sort of how small nuances can matter a lot and then others that we expected to have, you know, to influence results didn't. And there's, you know, there's a lot more to really unpack in the understandings of support for torture, and how that might apply to, you know, broad security policy as well as respect for rule of law. You know, beyond just this specific context?

Jenn Tostlebe 50:04

I'm curious, didn't like political leaning have any impact?

E Erin Kearns 50:08

Yeah, I mean, you know, we think about this, of course, you know, people who are more conservative and more likely to support torture, they were also more likely to have fluid

views on torture. And I think that I think that the, the mechanism there is that people who are more liberal are less likely to support torture and to be more likely to be like, I don't support torture and there's nothing you're going to say that's going to convince me otherwise.

E Erin Kearns 50:30
Which makes sense and is also like, kind of good.

Jenn Tostlebe 50:34
Yeah. Right.

J Jose Sanchez 50:36
So, one of the factors that you mentioned, and one of the core components of your book is, is the media. And can you talk about how torture appears in entertainment media, such as 24, and movies? And that sort of reminds me of, like, shows that I that I've watched, like, Chuck and Rambo?

E Erin Kearns 50:58
Yeah, absolutely. So most of this discussion about torture in entertainment media focuses on things like, you know, 24, which is this show that's focused on counterterrorism and comes out a few months after 9/11 and the suspects are almost always Muslim. And Jack Bauer. You know, yeah, you're not supposed to torture, but he does it. And it works. That saves today, yeah, torture and the way that it is depicted in that television show. Or we discuss in the context of movies like Zero Dark Thirty. One of the things that you know that yes, we see that torture often is used, it often works in entertainment media. One of the chapters of the book, we actually took some clips from good old Criminal Minds, where I think it's in the first season, where Jason Gideon, Mandy Patinkin's character, conducted an interrogation of a terrorism suspect where he actually used rapport building, which is, you know, what is actually effective in the real world. And what we found is when people saw rapport building, it did not make them less supportive of torture, it actually made them more supportive of torture, which is super depressing. Trying to correct those views is challenging.

J Jose Sanchez 52:07

Is rapport building considered torture?

E Erin Kearns 52:09
No rapport building is how interviews should be conducted when the interviewer is developing a relationship and respect, and rapport.

J Jose Sanchez 52:16
That that made people more supportive of torture?

E Erin Kearns 52:20
Yeah.

J Jose Sanchez 52:20
Okay. I think I think I somehow, it was not making sense.

E Erin Kearns 52:25
We assumed at first that we must have miscoded, something, double, triple, quadruple, quintuple checked and didn't. But this also brings us to the discussion about torture more broadly. This is a project that my friend Casey Delehanty, at Gardner Webb University, had approached me about in 2017 or so, he had seen me present the first chapter of the book on on 24 at a conference. And he was like, okay, so like, we see this and how it works in the counterterrorism context. But we really have no idea how common torture is, in popular media inside and outside of counterterrorism. So he and I watched the top 20 grossing films each year over a 10 year period. So 200 total popular movies.

J Jose Sanchez 52:26
You watched them? Like you sat down and watched them?

E Erin Kearns 53:14
Well, he he admittedly did most of this. Yes, yes. Watch movies for research, it will be fun he said.

J Jose Sanchez 53:21
I was about to say, if you need an RA [research assistant].

Jenn Tostlebe 53:23
Yeah, right. Sign me up to!

E Erin Kearns 53:26
No, no, you say that you say that. But, you have to think this is the most popular, highest grossing films. So there were a lot of ones it's like, well, I guess I'll watch Chipmunks the Squeakquel? That sounds great. Yeah, there were a number of ones where it was like, okay, well, I'll do this if you do that, because both are horrible sounding.

J Jose Sanchez 53:46
Don't underestimate my love for trash movies.

E Erin Kearns 53:48
Same, same, but it's different here.

E Erin Kearns 53:52
So we watched these 200 movies and most of these popular films, including films that are clearly geared towards children, include at least one torture scene. And a paper that we have out in Perspectives and Politics a year or two ago, where we really did this, you know, this content analysis and looking at not just how regularly torture is depicted, it's there's a lot of these common themes that when torture is used for informational/interrogational purposes, it's often shown to be effective. How torture is depicted is partially a function of whether it's the protagonist or the antagonist is perpetrating it. So it gives you a broader view about how media might be helping to shape views on torture.

Jenn Tostlebe 54:37
It just blows my mind that like there's torture in movies geared toward kids.

E Erin Kearns 54:44
Tons of it. Tons of it.

Jenn Tostlebe 54:45
Like when you emailed that emailed us that I was like, wait, what? And so I had to think back. And yeah, like it just doesn't register I think when I'm watching those kinds of movies.

J Jose Sanchez 54:58
Yeah, I had that moment where you know, Like, like, like you just hear like when the character in the show has like a realization that shatters their existence. And you can hear like the glass shattering. Like that was me. I was like, oh yeah, I guess, I starting thinking back to all the scenes that I've never really considered torture. Like an older sibling threatening violence on a younger sibling for information.

E Erin Kearns 55:21
Yeah, yeah. And we also we were intentionally very strict in our code. And so we were understating the case in that paper. We are, we're incredibly, what is very, very clearly torture. But yeah, I mean, the title of the paper is, "Wait? There's torture in Zootopia?" Because a student in the class I was teaching one summer when I was describing this, she was like, well, at least it's not, you know, God I love Zootopia, at least it's not in that movie. I was like, ooh, bad news for you. And just her like, shocked, saddened exclamation. I was like, Okay, this has to be the title of the paper.

Jenn Tostlebe 55:53
That's all the questions that we have for you right now. Thank you so much again. Is there anything that you would like to plug anything coming out?

E Erin Kearns 56:01
No, not really, cuz there's been a pandemic, and it has not been...

Jenn Tostlebe 56:04
productive?

E Erin Kearns 56:06

Yeah. But shortly. I certainly having a number of things that are under review right now, including actually a project with Casey Delehanty, where we're actually showing people clips of these popular film, non-counterterrorism depictions of torture and seeing how people interpret those and how that pushes and pulls support for torture.

E Erin Kearns 56:24

Okay. And then our last question is just where can people find you?

E Erin Kearns 56:28

Twitter at Kearns, k e a r n s, Erin M,, e r i n m [@KearnsErinM], or a Google search, you can find my website which has my research on it, as well as my contact information.

 Jenn Tostlebe 56:40

Awesome. Alright. Well, thank you again, so much. It was great having you on.

E Erin Kearns 56:44

Thanks so much for having me.

J Jose Sanchez 56:45

Thank you.

 Jenn Tostlebe 56:46

The Criminology Academy is available wherever you listen to podcasts. Make sure to follow us on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @thecrimacademy. If you're on Apple podcasts, please rate, review, and subscribe. Alternatively, let us know what you think of the episode by leaving us a comment on our website, thecriminologyacademy.com. And lastly, share The Crim Academy episodes with your friends and family.