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Public security – a question of trust?

Abstract

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PUBLIC SECURITY – A QUESTION OF TRUST?

Public security is an issue of trust. Only those who trust a situation develop a feeling of security. This is true for all spheres of life: for everyday life in a city, for personal relations, on markets, as citizens etc.

How does trust come about? From the sociological point of view the answer to this question is relatively simple: Trust results from setting aside ultimate knowledge, or to say it more clearly: I can trust if I can do without ultimate knowledge. If you trust you basically ignore any possible consequence rated as negative. To do without ultimate knowledge and full transparency is the only way to get along in modern everyday life. This applies all the more to complex societies where things like full information and transparent knowledge is completely unimaginable anyway. Even expert cultures, scientists, political representatives, mass media, legal advisers and even psychological advice or pastoral work are hardly able to produce real clarity - and this is a particular challenge to trust as a social mechanism.

On the one hand, complex societies are stable because they allow variance and pluralism; on the other hand, they are particularly vulnerable. Self-reinforcing processes in the media, the vulnerability of markets caused by pure moods or the risk of political instability resulting from a loss of trust in elites can contribute to a feeling of insecurity. The most significant vulnerability is caused by terrorism. Modern terrorism - specifically the one we currently experience as Islamist terrorism - is really modern and up to date, because it is quite familiar with the length of action chains and the density of functional chains. The decisive vantage point is the relationship between trust and security. The strategy of terrorism is to launch attacks which, instead of doing harm to specific individuals, are meant to directly challenge the fragile relationship between trust and security. This kind of terrorism is not focussed on those directly affected but on third parties. It is demonstrated violence whose sole purpose it is to show that it is actually demonstrable. The terrorist takes advantage of the anonymous, indifferent, trust-dependant structure of modern city life and provokes, above all, doubts about trust in factors which generally remain unknown.

The key issue at stake here is not terrorism; attention should rather be paid to the fragility of people's security feeling in a complex modern society. This effect is boosted by the new experience that societies tend to know fewer and fewer visible markers of themselves and, thus, become more and more complex. In the final analysis, digital instruments are nowadays the only means to make society comprehensible; this applies not only to citizens' experience but, above all, to professional functional areas of society, including law enforcement and security agencies. Especially in preventive - and partly also repressive - policing

these digital forms of pattern recognition will play an increasingly important role, which will have a considerable impact on the security feeling.

In any case, this discussion is strongly influenced by a development whose significance lies far beyond security policy. The shift from market activities and marketing, from business model development, from research, political communication, medical research and practice, from energy supply and traffic infrastructures to pattern recognition is downright revolutionary.

Gaining an understanding of this world and practically moving in it will more and more depend on pattern recognition practices and techniques. These are practices and techniques for which there is no established cultural representation - not even among experts, let alone laypersons. Many aspects we perceive as uncertainty and uneasiness about complexity are linked with this new epistemology which may be almost as revolutionary as was letterpress printing for the western culture, which, by the way, had a similar impact on people's security feeling at that time.

The security communication of the security agencies and the state is directly embedded in this revolutionary development. Particularly in preventive policing this form of knowledge about one's own society and the recognition of dangerous situations as well as the identification of individuals likely to engage in various types of crime will play a major role. At first sight, legal and constitutional questions arise about data security, informational self-determination, privacy and similar matters; with regard to data networking this also concerns the question of the federal structure of German police. At second sight, however, this issue appears to be far more complex. The cleverness of security communication will be decisive for achieving an appropriate degree of both visibility and invisibility management. In the political discourse the call for transparency is considered a key virtue; in terms of security this is a difficult field of trust building, the more so if you take the international and global dimensions of this issue into account.

This will have considerable consequences for political and police security communication. On the one hand, there is the paradox of security communication, and on the other hand, there is a necessity to explain to people what is going on. All these considerations are an issue of trust. Trust supports success. The decisive strategy for self-reflection on police practices should, thus, be to identify successful trust building conditions: namely to make sure that citizens are not required to observe developments more closely because this is and remains the prerequisite for trust.