

Human rights scepticism and its (lack of) counter-narratives: exploring contrasts and similarities in European newspaper coverage of the European Convention on Human Rights
Lieve Gies (Leicester, UK)

In the UK national press, scepticism directed at the Human Rights Act (HRA) 1998 can be seen as yet another expression of Euroscepticism. Human rights scepticism is driven by hostility towards the 'European' origins of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), incorporated by the HRA into UK law. However, this distrust of 'Europe' is interwoven with the stock media narrative that the criminal justice system is too soft on 'criminals'. Human rights figure in this discourse as an important tool with which wrongdoers (e.g. terrorism suspects) manage to avoid the punishment they rightly deserve. While penal populism is by no means confined to UK newspapers, elsewhere in the European press, this is not systematically linked to a discourse of human rights scepticism. There is also limited awareness in other European newspapers of how widespread human rights scepticism is in UK media and politics, despite the fact that the Conservatives, both in opposition and in government, have openly toyed with the idea of withdrawing from the ECHR altogether. This study explores the contrasts and similarities in European press coverage of the ECHR. A key finding is that the ECHR only generates media attention when it can be constructed as being fundamentally in conflict with national identity.