

United we stand : the constructed realities of 9/11

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United We Stand: The Constructed Realities of 9/11

Marguerite Moritz

Introduction

Hollywood cinema and prime time television have long provided media studies scholars with a rich variety of words and images that offer a deeply revealing window into the American psyche. While not studied in nearly the same detail, news texts are no less meaningful and, like their counterparts in the entertainment industry, no less subject to manipulation. While reporters and editors argue that they don't make the news, they just report it, viewers and critics may see a different reality. There is a long history in the field of communication research, and feminist film theory as well, that more than adequately demonstrates the constructed nature of news (see, for example, Epstein, Gans, Tuchman). Indeed, news texts do far more than relate the specifics of a particular event; they also offer rich material for analysis into the ways in which Americans see themselves and the rest of the world. In the world of contemporary American television, I would argue that, increasingly, it is the television news text that helps shape and reinforce American identity.

Early television in the United States offered far fewer viewing options than it does today. Then, three networks collectively accounted for more than 90% of the audience. With the arrival of cable television, network dominance began to diminish. In 1980 when CNN first brought 24-hour news coverage into the American news arena, the effort was largely derided by competitors who labeled Ted Turner's bold experiment the Chicken Noodle Network. Today, 24/7 television news coverage is a given in the United States, with CNBC, MSNBC, Fox and a much expanded CNN all established players. News consumption during that 21-year time period has migrated heavily to television and in certain circumstances (read September 11th) almost totally to television.

Now, the networks account for less than 50% of the American television viewing audience, and specialty cable outlets that focus on sports, comedy, classic films, cartoons, cooking, fashion, music and a host of other topics split the audience even further. Only occasionally do a majority of Americans watch the same programs. The Super Bowl remains the most watched television show of the year followed closely by the Academy Awards ceremony. But on a day to day basis, audiences are highly fragmented and television no longer provides a common viewing experience. News stories, even national ones, are often buried in the competition. Viewing patterns make it clear that audience interest rises and falls in relationship to the stories being reported. Ratings for news are relatively meager on most days. But like the Super Bowl and the Academy Awards, a major news story will draw a huge national audience to the television screen. The coverage of 9/11 offers a dramatic case in point.

In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, most Americans watched television coverage for hours and in some cases days on end. The images they saw and the stories they heard varied in only minor ways from network to network. While the narratives of 9/11 may not have created a new American identity, they did reinforce some existing ones: America is a free and open society; it has a free press in which debate is wide-ranging and reporting is neutral and objective; at the same time America is powerful, righteous and morally upstanding. It is the land of the free and the home of the brave.

These messages appear prominently among the thousands of images and hundreds of hours of reporting to a huge national audience. My analysis of US news coverage focuses on relatively brief moments, i.e., the instances where news networks package, label and promote their own coverage. These messages are in fact shorthand expressions of news producers seeking not simply to inform, but also to influence and attract audiences. I categorize them as promotions, labels, names and frames, and they provide vivid examples of news as constructed, and in some cases as contrived, reality.

Act One

In *Covering Violence*, William Cote and Roger Simpson argue that it is crucial for reporters and viewers to distinguish between what they call Act I and Act II stories. Act I is “the reporting right after the event . . . the traditional who, what, where, why and when. . . . Act II, by contrast, portrays the longer-term effects” and implications of a story (113).

American media critics were almost unanimous in their praise of American television's coverage of 9/11 in the early, or Act I, phase. Writing in *The New York Times*, Caryn James said,

TV clearly does some things very, very well and many of those things were on display in September: It was immediate and riveting. It was authoritative. It never slept and it provided a stable, familiar hearth around which strangers could gather and mourn in communion. (Sec. 2, p.1)

Los Angeles Times critic David Shaw was similarly impressed: "The nation's news media, battered for 25 years by declining credibility, appear to have regained respect among readers and viewers – at least temporarily." Several critics were especially impressed with television's principle anchors, who, in the absence of the president, calmed the nation. Gloria Cooper in her "Darts and Laurel" column in the *Columbia Journalism Review* said "the television anchors, whose steady professionalism through the perilous days that followed, proved how apt the term 'anchor' truly is" (10).

Richard C. Wald, a former network president and distinguished journalism professor, deemed American television coverage "unprecedented, remarkable." He said, "No broadcast or cable news operation did badly. The cable programs aired a few more erroneous reports than the broadcast networks, which, in turn, dwelt a little more on emotion" (8).

As the days and weeks of coverage wore on, however, many criticisms emerged as Act I rolled into a very lengthy news drama. Among the concerns was an increasingly obvious pro-USA bias in reporting, complete with American flags on the lapels of countless local anchormen and women. At the one-year anniversary, the highly respected PBS "Frontline" series aired a documentary entitled "Campaign Against Terror." In reviewing the piece, *The New York Times* wrote that "the entire program feels as if it could have been made by the White House publicity machine." At the same time, commercial news organizations were criticized for a year of heavy reliance on human interest stories. "Too many programs take the easy, sentimental route, extolling the strength of heroes and wallowing in tears, while avoiding tough issues" (James, "Television's Special Day").

But even in the very early television news reports on the 9/11 attacks, there is evidence of a pro-American perspective and bias that would be impossible for any news agency to entirely avoid. Reporters, writers, producers, anchors and news executives are, after all, products of their own culture. And as I hope to demonstrate, this results in messages particularly con-

structed to not only carry “the facts” but also to encode them with very particular meanings.

Packaging the news Graphics

In analyzing the television text, a central emphasis must be the visual elements of the coverage. This is, after all, the distinguishing feature of television news as contrasted to newspapers, magazines and radio. In addition to live pictures and videotape replays, increasingly we see graphics commanding an on-screen television presence in the US. Branding and labeling a story is now routine practice so that throughout the time viewers are watching, they are seeing this framing device, a sometime shadowy yet ever-present message that is being absorbed by viewers even if they are not focusing on it.

Within hours of the September attacks, networks began labeling their coverage. On the NBC network, “Attack on America” appeared early on and was followed by “America on Alert” and then “America Strikes Back.” CNN had similar labels to which they eventually added “The New Normal” – implying that normalcy itself was transformed on 9/11. These naming strategies appear as on-screen graphics, short headlines, often in color, that dominate the lower third of the television screen. This special electronic effect is in widespread use on both local and national television news programs in the United States. Almost every significant story or every story that is being promoted as significant is given an on-screen label.

Packaging the news Looping video

Given the ubiquitous nature of television news organizations in America, difficult images are seen with some frequency. Scenes of car crashes and crimes may be hard to watch, but they come and go quickly and are often forgotten in fairly short order simply because there are so many of them. Other images, however, have long – sometimes lifelong – staying power. As Cote and Simpson correctly point out, the Kennedy assassination, the Challenger explosion, and the first moon landing are “vivid examples of what psychiatrists and psychologists call flashbulb memories, historic events that

are burned into the minds of individuals, communities or whole nations.” These images have “enormous power” and very typically stay “locked into our individual and collective consciousness for better or worse” (124).

Television news executives are quick to understand the compelling nature of powerful pictures. In the case of their coverage of the World Trade Center collapse, the networks employed several video devices to add not only visual information but also drama to the television screen. One such device involved looping video, i.e., taking a clip of videotape and threading it on a “loop” for continuous playback. In the early coverage of the 9/11 story, for example, NBC ran a one-inch stripe of video across the screen in a muted tone of red. The video was on a loop so that it played over and over again. The image showed one tower of the WTC standing as smoke poured out and then collapsing into tons of concrete dust and rubble.

This looping video played continuously the morning of September 13th and was the backdrop to an interview done by “Today Show” host Katie Couric with First Lady, Laura Bush. Ironically, the topic of the interview was whether school children should be watching the difficult television images presented by the 9/11 story. At the very same time they were discussing the need to limit children’s exposure to traumatizing images, the network was looping the WTC video. At no time did the anchor note or reflect on the fact that the repetition was really unnecessarily exposing all audience members to images that were difficult to watch.

Indeed, the looping image stands in stark contrast to the discussion about the harmful effect of traumatic television images on young viewers. “We see a lot of images that are horrific,” Mrs. Bush said to Ms. Couric as the image of the collapsing tower ran underneath her own picture. There was no suggestion that the news could be presented differently, i.e., that the networks could limit their use of traumatic images and eliminate much of their repetition of images. The only point made was that parents should be careful about exposing their children to these images.

Indeed, the continual re-playing of images by all the news networks came under attack from numerous quarters: psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors, journalists, educators and audience members themselves. While there are important reasons for television journalists to show some images more than once, there are also reasons to ask when more harm than good is done in this process. Cote and Simpson were among the first to suggest that television has a history of exploiting dramatic pictures. They conclude that even in covering an enormous story, “hour after hour, day after day, of showing the same tape can reasonably be called overkill” (134). Richard Wald asked the

question specifically in relation to 9/11 coverage: “What did we do to ourselves by showing over and over and over again those pictures of the planes hitting the buildings? . . . What is the cumulative effect on society of all this coverage?” (8).

Packaging the news

Opens and closes

Television news coverage today is increasingly live coverage. In the case of a breaking news story such as 9/11, 80 or 90% of what audiences see is being done live. This certainly was the case with respect to the early days of the 9/11 reporting. The former vice president for news at CNN recently acknowledged that being able to do a “live shot” used to be lower on the list but is now the “number one skill a reporter needs” to land a position at that network. In other words, being able to deliver a live, un-scripted report from the field is now seen as an even more critical skill than writing, interviewing or doing analysis (Bernknopf, interview).

A typical scenario follows: the show anchor opens with a statement about the latest development or fact emerging from the coverage and then introduces a reporter who is at the World Trade Center and transmits a report live via satellite truck. The reporter may have an eyewitness or an expert guest on hand to interview. When the report concludes, the anchor says a few words and then tosses to another reporter, this time live at the Pentagon. Again the reporter has a guest or perhaps just describes what he or she is seeing as the camera pans across the scene (. . . as you can see behind me, Tom . . .). All of this material is live and much of it is necessarily ad-libbed.

But some of the material being presented even in these live, breaking news situations is pre-produced, scripted into a package of material that is designed to have an emotional impact on the audience. And it is in these packages that we see a concentrated version of the news discourse as it is being developed. The most obvious examples of pre-produced material are show “opens and closes” which typically are highly produced and heavily choreographed with slow-motion video and music tracks.

During the first week of 9/11 coverage, networks were already employing slow motion, or “slo-mo,” an emotion-enhancing technique that beckons all the more in the age of digital editing where it is easily and quickly done. Slo-mo is a particularly common production technique added to the mix in the coverage of tragedies. Its intent is to heighten the emotional moment. It

is a way of saying visually that time is almost standing still. In our mind's eye we can see these events not in real time but in exquisite detail – something that seems more revealing than the real time event, even though it is actually a distortion of that event.

Music tracks are the natural born companion to slo-mo visuals. In a certain sense, once a reporter or editor has decided to “enhance” the production, it is a logical aesthetic decision to add an evocative piece of music. The use of music and special effects will be especially obvious to the European viewer who may find these enhancements so unusual in a news program as to be jarring. They are perhaps associated more with Hollywood productions, but for an American viewer, they are common.

For example, a news show open that aired on NBC on September 13th showed the World Trade Center collapsing, while layered under this image was a slo-mo video of an American flag waving. All of this was backed up by a music track under an announcer's voice, saying, “This is an NBC News special report, Attack on America.” And the show title then came on the screen. Another NBC open was created from a dozen different video images and sounds. The emotionally powerful montage included firefighters chanting, “USA, USA, USA” as well as George W. Bush at Ground Zero, shouting into a bullhorn to reassure rescue workers that America would hunt down the attackers.

While the open is designed to engage and entice the viewer, the close serves a different purpose. Here, the idea is to assure the viewer that despite the chaotic situation just revealed in the news reports, the world can be understood, captured and contained in a neat program. Indeed, bringing order to chaos is the job of the news organization, particularly in a time of crisis. For years, the television anchor Tom Brokaw has ended his nightly news show by saying, “I'll see you tomorrow night.” The message: no matter how bad things get out there, I will be back to show you the latest events, explain how they affect your life, and be at least one thing that will remain constant.

Cooper in the *Columbia Journalism Review* saw this very function as a critical contribution made by media during the 9/11 reporting:

[H]owever arbitrary the framework of the long-established news process, however imperfect the categories by which it organizes day-to-day experience, the implicit rationality of the process itself, manifest in familiar forms one could read and watch and hear, gave reassuring, if unconscious, testimony to the triumph of order over chaos. (10)

The closing moments of the "Today Show" on September 13th provide a typical example of how viewers are both reassured and encouraged to remain tuned in. News anchors Katie Couric and Matt Lauer were both shown at their anchor desk and Ms. Couric referred to the "many, many developments today and more to come . . . and of course the stories of horror continue and of course the stories of hope."

Mr Lauer: "Yeah, on the good side."

Ms. Couric: "Of course our coverage will continue throughout the day, Tom Brokaw is up next. We'll see you tomorrow."

The on-screen image then dissolves to a live camera shot of the American flag at the World Trade Center.

Promoting the news

In a commercial system, advertisers pay for television air time, which is expensive. During the early days of 9/11 coverage, networks were not carrying any commercials, ostensibly because it would have been beyond indelicate to go from a report at the World Trade Center to an ad for dog food, or for an airline. But the networks did create and run advertisements for themselves, which technically are called promotions rather than commercials. These promotional spots for news programming ran repeatedly during the days and weeks following 9/11.

Just like advertisements for cars and dish soap, promotions for the news are pre-produced, and typically include a spoken text coupled with dramatic images and music. Network news promotions are designed to show how the news organization is approaching its mission and its most important customer, the audience. Generally, promotions are in the form of direct address to the viewer and concern the promise of the news.

One example from the cable network MSNBC combined evocative music with images from the World Trade Center and a picture of the Statue of Liberty. Headlines were then dissolved on and off the screen for viewers to read:

Who Did This?
How Did They Do It?
What Will America Do?
How Will America Change?
We Know You Have Questions

We Will Continue to Bring You the Whole Picture
MSNBC

The combined words and images create an editorial framing that is clearly pro-American. At the same time, however, the network invokes the notion of fairness and objectivity when it promises to bring viewers “the whole picture.” The promise is an effort to mask the inherent contradiction in having a pro-American bias on the one hand and promising comprehensive, unbiased reporting on the other. In his classic study of mainstream national news organizations, Herbert J. Gans notes that journalism aims to be objective but that story selection and story writing in and of itself is a value statement. “Value exclusion is therefore accompanied by value inclusion both through story selection and as opinions expressed in specific stories” (182).

Thus in a very real sense, the value-free news program is an impossibility, not simply in the United States, but in any cultural and political context. Precisely because values are reflected in each and every story selection, what journalists elect to cover is labeled news and what they choose to ignore is labeled not newsworthy. Beyond that, the way a story is covered – and this would include the selection of images, the choice of words, the juxtaposition of words and images and many other aspects of production – further confounds the notion of objectivity and neutrality.

What journalists actually have instead of objectivity is a set of codes and professional practices that combine to offer a road map or set of guidelines for creating a professionally acceptable story. If there is a formula for making this happen, it often is expressed as getting “both sides” of a story. Thus news is conceived in terms of conflict and the reporter’s role is often to represent the proponents and the opponents of the latest tax plan or the new highway. In covering disasters, the reporter’s role is often descriptive, at least initially. After the account of what happened, the next question may be why did it happen. Here, reporters may invoke their normative role as watchdogs of government, business and other powerful entities. Theoretically, there is a clear line between opinion/commentary and news reporting which is supposedly confined to factual information. But, the very choice of what to cover and what to ignore is itself a statement of opinion as to what does and does not matter, whose voice should be heard and whose can be ignored.

In the case of 9/11 coverage, the evidence suggests that there were both internal and external pressures on journalists to present a pro-American perspective. By internal pressure, I refer to the points of identification that an

American journalist is likely to have by virtue of citizenship: Americans living and working in the US would identify with US culture far more than they would with Arab cultures, for example. External pressures come from a variety of places including the expectations of editors, news managers and audiences. Journalists become indoctrinated into the culture of their newsrooms simply by working. Over months and years, they acquire a similar set of beliefs about the nature and definition of news. These become mutually reinforcing among newsroom personnel. Contrary viewpoints may be raised, but if a person strays too far from the prevailing attitudes about what stories should be covered and how stories should be framed, that person is likely to become marginalized from the larger group. Rarely if ever are there formal mechanisms for controlling the perspectives journalists bring to their reporting. Instead, a powerful common culture emerges from the daily experience of working together on a news product.

Patriotism on display

In reporting 9/11, American journalists clearly were not required to maintain professional distance and indeed had license to reflect a mood of sadness and loss, and perhaps also of fervent patriotism. NBC anchor Tom Brokaw choked up on the air when he had to describe an image showing three New York firefighters raising the American flag over Ground Zero. "And this evocative picture," Mr. Brokaw told his audience, "reminiscent of Iwo Jima in World War Two." (His voice then broke and he stopped to regain his composure.) "I'm sorry I was caught unexpectedly emotional in that moment as I saw that flag," he told his viewers (transcription from NBC News videotape).

CBS anchor Dan Rather went on David Letterman's late night talk show and broke down in tears as he described what it was like to anchor the 9/11 coverage for his network. His appearance itself generated extensive media attention, virtually all of it positive and sympathetic. *New York Times* critics Jim Rutenberg and Bill Carter claimed television newscasts were laden with patriotic commentary.

Empathy with victims is a staple of news coverage, but television has draped its coverage with the flag in the last week. In between presenting straightforward reports – or even, like Mr. Rather, in interviews away from their news programs – anchors and correspondents have not hesitated to conduct the post-attack cov-

erage primarily through the viewpoint of the United States. Use of the pronouns “our” and “us” have been commonplace.

There was little concern if a newsperson stepped outside of the usual limits of objectivity and neutrality to show emotion, express sympathy for the people who died, or express a pro-American point of view. In fact, if a newsperson failed to express this kind of sympathy and patriotism, the repercussions could be significant as the following cases illustrate.

In the aftermath of 9/11, Av Westin, President of ABC News, was invited to appear on a panel at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, which is considered the preeminent journalism program in the United States. At that session, Mr. Westin was asked if he thought the Pentagon was a legitimate military target. He responded by saying that he did not have an opinion and that it was important that he not formulate one.

Our job is to determine what is, not what ought to be and when we get into the job of what ought to be, I think we are not doing a service to the American people. I can say the Pentagon got hit. I can say this is what their position is. This is what our position is. But for me to take a position that this is right or wrong – that’s for me in my private life.

Westin’s comments were published in the web-based Drudge Report (the publication that first broke the Clinton-Lewinsky story) and then picked up by the *New York Post* which wrote a scathing editorial denouncing the Westin remarks: “He’s not about to make a judgment that the murder of scores of Americans without provocation or warning is essentially wrong. . . . Is he for real?” (*NYP*, October 31, 2001).

Within a day, Westin publicly apologized for his remarks, saying, “I was wrong. Under any interpretation, the attack on the Pentagon was criminal and entirely without justification.”

Talk show host Bill Maher set off a firestorm of protest when he voiced what was seen as an anti-American sentiment on his late night program “Politically Incorrect” – a show designed to be controversial. The incident began when a panelist on the show, Dinesh D’Souza, disagreed with the contention that the suicide bombers were cowards. Host Maher agreed with that idea, saying, “We (the US) have been the cowards lobbing cruise missiles from 2,000 miles away . . . that’s cowardly. Staying in the airplane when it hits the building, say what you want about it, it’s not cowardly.”

Viewers said they were outraged. Sponsors said they were leaving the show, but ABC said it stood behind Maher and the show because it cele-

brates freedom of speech and encourages the animated exchange of ideas and opinions. "Understandably, this forum can oftentimes arouse intense emotions, especially during such a sensitive time. While we remain sensitive to the current climate following last week's tragedy, and continue to do our part to help viewers cope with unfolding events, we have an obligation to offer a forum for the expression of our nation's diverse opinions" (McDaniel).

Maher also issued a public apology the next day. "In no way was I intending to say, nor have I ever thought, that the men and women who defend our nation in uniform are anything but courageous and valiant, and I offer my apologies to anyone who took it wrong," he said. Both Federal Express and Sears, Roebuck and Co. cancelled their sponsorship of the show (Schlosser). Eventually the show was cancelled.

Conclusion

In some ways, the coverage of 9/11 was one of television's finest hours, or certainly one of television technology's finest. Live cameras were on the scene as the story was still unfolding. Pictures were transmitted instantly to a global audience. Reporters were by and large accurate in their description of the event. But this coverage also stood in stark contrast to the more typical television fare of entertainment, celebrity and scandal. Indeed, in the aftermath of 9/11, American media critics and journalists alike noted that too much of the news had become sensational, focusing on celebrity and scandal at the expense of substantive issues. Andie Tucher in the prestigious *Columbia Journalism Review* captured the criticism this way: "Journalism failed its public in recent years by lavishing on frivolous topics the attention, gravity and resources that belong to its true business – explaining the state of the civilization or at least of its citizens" (159).

The networks in particular were castigated for their lack of international coverage. The broadcast networks long ago closed most of their foreign bureaus. In 1980, for example, NBC, CBS and ABC all had Paris bureaus with 5 or 6 correspondents and an equal number of producers. By the late 1990s, all of the bureaus had been closed and remain so today. CNN is the only network with a Paris bureau and it is a relatively small one. As bureaus closed, news coverage shifted more and more toward domestic stories and away from international ones.

Even CNN, which unlike the other networks has bureaus all over the world, carries relatively few international stories on the CNN Domestic channel. Only CNN International, which broadcasts in most countries of the world but not in the US, carries a significant amount of world news. In the weeks prior to 9/11, CNN Domestic had actually been considering adding quiz shows to its program schedule as a way of increasing ratings.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, broadcast journalists vowed that things would change, that they would increase their international coverage. But there is little evidence that anything has changed. Major news organizations have instituted elaborate contingency plans in the event of another terror attack in New York or Washington. Columnist Clarence Page has noted a shift "away from domestic issues to foreign policy and defense, two areas to which the press and the public had given short shrift." (23). But the perspective itself remains distinctly pro-American because journalists are products of both the larger US culture and their own news culture. One need only look at the reporting on the US invasion of Iraq for clear evidence of the fear that "vigorously challenging" the Bush administration will be seen as "unpatriotic" (25). Few American journalists manage to escape the pressures of the personal and the professional cultures in which they operate and those who do rarely find or retain employment at American networks.

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