

Introduction

America's greatest threat

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Welcome to the seminar on terrorism and the media. I'm Brigitte Nacos. I teach political science at Columbia University. For the past dozen years, I have been particularly interested in studying terrorism, which I came to through my work in media. My current focus is on investigating the role of the media in public opinion and the impact of the media on decision makers. Nowhere is the fit between media, public opinion, and decision making as tight as it is in the area of political violence and terrorism.

Most of us know about the events of September 11, when hijacked planes crashed into the World Trade Center in New York and into the Pentagon near just outside Washington, D.C. An additional plane, which was on its way to a target in Washington, crashed near Pittsburgh. From that date on, most Americans realized that terrorism is a very real threat. In fact, surveys have shown that the vast majority of Americans believe that terrorism is by far the most important problem facing the American government and the American public today.

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In this section of *Covering Terrorism*, my two-part e-seminar, we will look at how the media's coverage of terrorism shaped the events of September 11—both before and after the attacks occurred. First, I will discuss how the public came to understand the events of 9/11 through the eyes of the media. Next, I will focus on the specific aspirations of the terrorists and how the media helped them to achieve those goals. Finally, I will review the high and low points of the media's coverage—from the public's dramatically increased appreciation for the media's contributions to the fear that resulted from the media's overcoverage of the anthrax threat.

An Uncertain Reality

Viewing 9/11

I want to start by discussing how the media covered the events of September 11 and how the public perceived those events through the eyes of the media. Many people watched at least some of the events of 9/11 live on television. Others saw the many replays broadcast in the hours and days thereafter. However we watched what happened on that day in New York and Washington, the images on the screen were not terribly new. Most of us had seen these images before. We had seen terrorists attacking a skyscraper. We had seen a skyscraper engulfed in flames. We had seen a plane crashing into a building. We had seen a federal building in Washington blown to pieces. We had seen Manhattan under siege. We had seen a nuclear type of

cityscape. We had seen all of these images in various disaster movies over the past few years.

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I think that on September 11 many people were not quite aware whether they were watching reality or another movie. In the hours and even days after the events, people often described what they had seen and heard in those terms of uncertain reality. I have collected quotes from people who watched the events in different ways. Some were in the World Trade Center and lucky enough to escape; others watched with their own eyes from a safe distance; and yet others watched on television:

"I looked over my shoulder and saw the United Airlines plane coming. It came over the Statue of Liberty. It was just like a movie. It just directly was guided into the second tower."

"I think I'm going to die of smoke inhalation, because you know, in fires most people don't die of burning, they die of smoke inhalation. This cop or somebody walks by with a flashlight. It's like a strange movie. I grab the guy by the collar and walk with him."

"I looked up and saw this hole in the World Trade Center building. And I—I couldn't believe it. I thought, you know, this can't be happening. This is a special effect; it's a movie."

"It's insane. It's just like a movie. It's, it's actually surreal to me to see it on TV and see major buildings collapse."

"This is very surreal. Well it's out of a bad sci-fi film, but every morning we wake up and you're like: It wasn't a dream. It wasn't a movie. It actually happened."

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John Updike, the novelist, watched the destruction of the World Trade Center from his tenth-floor apartment in Brooklyn. He said, "The destruction of the World Trade Center twin towers had the false intimacy of television, on a day of perfect reception." Many people who joined the newscast in progress thought they were watching a promotional clip for one of the many disaster movies scheduled to be released later in the fall.

"The greatest work of art"

The German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen said the following about the events of 9/11:

Characters can bring about in one act what we in music cannot dream of—that people practice madly for ten years, completely fanatically for a concert, and then die. That is the greatest work of art for the whole cosmos.”

He called what happened in New York "the greatest work of art." There was an outcry in Germany. People were furious and some of his concerts were cancelled, including two concerts in Hamburg and at least one in New York.

How could he say such a thing? I do not know Mr. Stockhausen, I only know his music. I do not want to apologize for him; that is his responsibility. However, I have thought a great deal about how a man could come out with such a statement. More than most people, I think, he must have completely confused reality and pseudoreality. Perhaps he was completely preoccupied with the pictures in his head.

Most of us are guided by the pictures we have in our heads. Walter Lippmann studied the effects of the media on news consumers before the advent of television, when the media consisted of the press—newspapers and news magazines. Lippmann said, "For the most part we do not first see and then define. We first define and then see." We define according to what we have in our heads before we see something.

It seems to me that Stockhausen probably processed what he saw on the screen and related it in a strange way to some musical creation he had in his head, perhaps regarding the end of the world. He came out with a statement that seemed to be about the World Trade Center disaster but was actually related to something internal. Eventually the composer said, "Not for a moment have I thought or felt the way my words are now being interpreted in the press." Of course the press did not interpret Stockhausen's words, they quoted him. But I think it is quite credible that the confusion I know existed in my own head as I watched the screen on September 11 was magnified in the composer's head.

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As people eventually began to realize the truth—that this was real life, not a movie—the impact of what had happened was finally realized. In a way, it was a blessing that people did not immediately understand that the images on the screen were reality. People had a delayed tape in their heads. Realizing slowly what had really happened helped to keep people from panicking and completely losing their bearings. People reacted with shock and horror, but calmly. Even in the immediately affected areas of New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C., people were not in a state of panic even for a moment. In a strange way, I think, their calm had to do

with recognizing the images that appeared on the screen.

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The Terrorist Production

Hollywood's playbook

It is a great irony that terrorists with a background of hating American popular culture, of hating Hollywood as the symbol of that culture, and of hating the damaging, decadent influence that they think Hollywood has had on their own society, took a page out of Hollywood's own playbook to stage their terror of September 11. It is no longer an academic question whether fiction writers and moviemakers have innovative minds and can predict what terrorists might do next or terrorists take their ideas from the creations of Hollywood.

I do not know the answer for sure. We know that the U.S. government has consulted with Hollywood moviemakers about possible terrorist methods. The theory is that the people who create movies about terrorism might be able to anticipate the terrorists' future actions. Personally, I think it is very likely that the terrorists also watch these movies—at least terrorists of the variety who committed the incidents on 9/11. They are very familiar with the media in the larger sense of the entertainment media. They create their methods out of what they see in Western entertainment. In a way, they may have even outdone Hollywood; September 11 may have shown us a greater horror than we have seen to date in the various disaster films produced by Hollywood.

Global theater

From the terrorist point of view, the incidents of September 11 came together as the perfectly choreographed breaking news production. In their book *The Theater of Terror: Mass Media and International Terrorism*, Gabriel Weiman and Conrad Winn compare terrorism with theater:

Modern terrorism can be understood in terms of the production requirements of theatrical engagements. Terrorists pay attention to script preparation, cast selection, sets, props, role playing, and minute-by-minute stage management.

While the theater metaphor remains useful, I believe that September 11 showed us a terrorist production that transcends this metaphor. We are now talking about the perfect television news production that is broadcast worldwide. Particularly in terms of the audience reached, we can no longer think in terms of theater, or even of movie theaters. September 11 was staged for television transmission on a global basis.

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Terrorist events have not always had the opportunity to be transmitted around the world. In the past, terrorist and nonterrorist events have received a great deal of attention in the United States and elsewhere. For example, news of the November 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy traveled around the world. Hundreds of millions of people learned about his death. In the United States, many people watched his assassination live on their televisions. However, people in other parts of the world could not receive live television feeds. There were no satellite transmissions and people simply did not own television sets in many parts of the world. There remained limits at the time on how extensively the event could be reported around the world.

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The 1972 Olympic Games in Munich, Germany, were set up to transmit news about the competition as widely as possible. During the games, Black September, a Palestinian terrorist group, attacked members of the Israeli Olympic team. The terrorists killed some of the Israeli athletes and used others as human shields in their effort to gain free passage out of the country. The incident ended with a terrible massacre when the German police tried to prevent the departure of the terrorists from an airport outside Munich. Most of the terrorists and all of their captives died in that shootout.

Black September was tremendously successful in terms of transmitting news of its terrorist incident. The group had chosen to commit terrorism at the Olympics because it knew that communication means had been set up at the games to reach around the world. It is estimated that up to 800 million people watched as the incident unfolded. For the first time, many people learned of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or discovered that there were groups willing to resort to violence for the Palestinian cause. From the terrorist perspective, they must not only stage the incident but also ensure the availability of communications to transmit that incident to a global audience.

Media Attention

An extreme statement

From the perspective of those who staged the events of 9/11, they were as successful as possible in terms of achieving their media goals. It has been suggested that religiously motivated terrorists do not want to communicate with the enemy. Instead, their conversation is with God. I cannot be convinced of this argument. I would certainly say that the perpetrators of September 11 were religiously motivated, even if they operated outside the mainstream of their religion. Yet everything in the production of September 11 points to an extreme awareness that the architects

of this terror had of media coverage and media impact. They knew the effect they would have if they managed to pull off a quadruple hijacking with kamikaze flights hitting various targets. No terrorist group had ever committed a larger act or acts of terrorism than the ones we experienced on September 11. When terrorists strike hard, they certainly receive the attention of the media and their target publics.

In one respect commentators were right to compare the events of 9/11 to those at Pearl Harbor in 1941: Both attacks came as surprises. No one had anticipated anything like these events to occur. However, it is not a good comparison with respect to media and communication effectiveness. Not until three hours after the first bombing in Pearl Harbor were the attacks announced on the radio on the American mainland. Even then the announcers basically read from wire-service dispatches. It took more than a week before mainland newspapers were able to print the first pictures of the damage inflicted on Pearl Harbor. As we all know, there was instant live coverage soon after the first hit on the World Trade Center.

Necessity of publicity

It was commonly reported that 9/11 was the first time that hijackers had been able to simultaneously take over four planes. That is not the case; there had been an earlier quadruple hijacking. I think it tells a great deal about the difference in media coverage today that even students of history simply forgot that four airplanes had been simultaneously hijacked before. In 1970, Palestinian groups hijacked four commercial airliners headed from Europe to the United States. One of the hijackings was not successful—the hijackers were overwhelmed. The other three planes were eventually brought down by the hijackers in a remote area of Jordan. Hundreds of passengers, most of them Europeans and Americans, were held hostage for several weeks.

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This incident occurred at a time when print remained the predominant news medium. Television existed, but satellite transmissions were just beginning. Without the easily transported equipment of today, it was difficult to quickly transmit television from the most remote places of the world. The decision makers and the publics of the involved countries—those nations with passengers on the planes—did learn about the incident. They were aware of what was happening to Europeans and Americans in the Middle East. Yet at no point in 1970 did we see the type of massive coverage, or even overcoverage, of the terrorist incident that is typical today. At no point did President Richard Nixon or the heads of the affected European countries show that they were preoccupied with this crisis.

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The hijackers had wanted to gain the release of some of their comrades from various

prisons. With Nixon and the other leaders simply going about their business, the hijackers eventually gave up and released their hostages. They had not realized their media-centered goals and were very disappointed. I think their failure was based largely on the lack of the technological means to make the incident a major media event.

Blanket coverage

When we try to understand how the media cover terrorist incidents, the volume of coverage involved, we typically undertake a systematic content analysis of television, print, and radio coverage. There was no need to count the column inches or figure out the amount of television or radio airtime after September 11, since there was nonstop coverage for days. Literally, network television showed no other programming for the first five days. Not even commercials were shown. I cannot remember a longer stretch of time without commercials on television. Even the sports station either switched to crisis coverage or simply showed the American flag on their screen.

People who tried to get away from the crisis coverage basically had nowhere to go. For a while no sports events were held. When they resumed, you saw players wearing the caps of the New York police and fire departments. During interviews, people were asked about their feelings about the terrorist events. Suspended entertainment programs were sometimes different when they returned after 9/11. Letterman, Leno, and the other late-evening comedian shows could not find the right material to joke and laugh about. The first program of Letterman was very serious: He interviewed Dan Rather, a hard-nosed newsman. When the events of 9/11 came up, Rather broke down twice in tears.

When the NBC drama *West Wing* resumed, the scheduled first episode was delayed and the network instead showed a quickly produced new segment addressing the theme of terrorism. It was ironic how in this way actual terrorism became fiction, just as fiction had perhaps become reality on September 11. There was certainly blanket coverage in the media. In addition to the nonstop television coverage, *Time* and *Newsweek* devoted their first eight issues after 9/11 to themes related to terrorism. In all respects, this blanket coverage must have more than fulfilled the keenest hopes that the architects of 9/11 had for media attention.

With this kind of overwhelming media attention, the public was, of course, very aware of what had happened. I have never seen polls after any other crisis or terrorist event showing as much awareness as after 9/11. Literally 99 or 100 percent of the people surveyed said they regularly followed news about the September 11 crisis. Television and radio were by far the most commonly named news sources. Perhaps surprisingly, two-thirds of people surveyed said that they went to the

Internet for additional information about the event.

This attention to news about the terrorist events was not short-lived. Weeks later, nine-tenths of Americans who were polled said they still followed the events in the media closely or very closely. The anthrax scare probably intensified interest. We do not need surveys to know that political decision makers throughout the country certainly followed the news very closely.

Terror and Renown

Fear and anxiety

With all the public attention, it was not difficult for the perpetrators of September 11 to spread fear and anxiety. Polls found that far more people feared that terrorism would visit them or their families after 9/11 than had been the case after the Oklahoma City bombing. In addition, people reported remaining fearful for weeks and months after the events of September 11—much longer than after the Oklahoma City bombing.

Many people told pollsters they were depressed. A connection existed between those people who said that they could not stop watching television, that they were addicted to news about the terrorism events, and the people who reported being depressed. This response continued past the short term, with far more women than men being affected in this way. Eventually, the number of people who said they were depressed did decline slightly.

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Although public officials told people to go back to their normal lives, it was very difficult to do in the first few days after 9/11. Every couple of hours, Mayor Giuliani of New York would appear in front of microphones and cameras for one of his many news conferences. During the first week or so, these news conferences were broadcast live not only by the local, New York-based media but also by the national and cable networks. Returning to a normal life was also difficult when the media kept reporting that Vice President Richard Cheney was in hiding in case of a new terrorist attack on the White House or another Washington locale. The public knew all this information only through the media rather than through first-hand knowledge.

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International impact

Naturally, the American public was particularly aware of what had happened and particularly prone to watch the media. However, that heightened awareness was also true to a large extent for the rest of the world. We know from surveys that a

remarkable number of people from many different countries knew about the terrorist attacks very quickly after the first target in New York was hit. They often learned about the events from television or they were alerted by friends. Many then went to the Internet for more information. In fact, access to the Internet broke down in many nations as too many people tried to log on. The number of people who immediately knew about the events was not quite as high as the 100 percent reported in the United States. Still, around 90 percent of the people polled in Hungary, Russia, France, and England knew of the incident within a few hours. That remarkable rate speaks to the global nature of our contemporary communications net.

Even though they had not been targeted, people in foreign nations—including Hungarians, Russians, French, British, and Germans—told pollsters that they too were afraid of future terrorist incidents that might directly affect them. The terrorists who struck on September 11 were able not only to spread fear and anxiety among the American public but also to achieve that same effect to a large, if lesser, extent in many countries around the world. In addition, we know that the events were heavily covered in the Middle East, the region from which the terrorists came. While I haven't seen opinion polls from that region, we can be certain that the degree of awareness was at least as high in the Middle East as in other parts of the world.

Why do they hate us?

On September 27, the *Christian Science Monitor*—an American newspaper more prone than most to offer foreign news coverage—published a long article that responded to a question President Bush had asked while addressing a joint session of Congress: "Why do they [the terrorists] hate us?" Peter Ford, the writer for the *Monitor*, tried to summarize the grievances not only of people like Osama bin Laden and his terrorist organization but also of those people in the Arab and Muslim world who have strong anti-American feelings but do not resort to terrorism. He did a good job of articulating the feelings of individuals from those circles:

The buttons that Mr. bin Laden pushes in statements and interviews—the injustice done to the Palestinians, the cruelty of continued sanctions against Iraq, the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia, the repressive and corrupt nature of the U.S.-backed Gulf governments—win a good deal of popular sympathy in that part of the world.

This article was only one of many similar reports. The print, television, and radio media suddenly discovered why Americans are hated in the Muslim and Arab world. I think it is interesting that in the two and a half weeks after the attacks of September 11, the major television networks and National Public Radio broadcast a combined total of 33 stories dealing with the basic question: What are the roots of anti-American sentiments in the Muslim and Arab world? In the more than eight

months of 2001 that preceded the terrorism of 9/11, the same news organizations had not produced a single story on this topic.

Recognition

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This very dramatic increase in coverage proves that the terrorists were successful in realizing what I call their recognition goal—getting the media to report about their causes and grievances. I have never seen a better example in all my previous research into terrorist incidents. The media also suddenly showed a great deal of interest in the statements of bin Laden. Starting in at least 1996, bin Laden had released religious edicts, so-called fatwas, which were easily available on the Internet. After violence had struck, the media suddenly became interested in analyzing these statements.

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Before the hijackers struck on September 11, they made sure they had left behind material that would fall into the hands of the FBI or police. As I have said before, some terrorism experts argue that religious terrorists are not interested in explaining themselves to their enemies, that they communicate only with God. If that was the case, why would the hijackers of September 11 have left us material? Basically, they provided us with their instructions to themselves on how to prepare for their "great deeds." The material also explains why the terrorists were willing to die for their causes. Of course, all this material was published or reported on in the American and international media.

My point is not to criticize the media for reporting on this material. Nor am I saying that we should not learn about the causes and grievances that can lead to political violence. My point is that it is not ideal to pay attention to these kinds of stories as a result of an act or acts of terrorism. When the media reports on such issues only in these circumstances, they confirm the terrorists' conviction that they must strike hard against their enemy. Only in this way can they reach their target populations with the message of why they act, why they are angry, and why they want to destroy the United States.

Episodic coverage

The coverage of the news in the United States is typically far more episodic than thematic. Episodic coverage focuses on a narrow case: Who did what? When? Who suffered? The media report on the identity of the perpetrator, what he or she did, and the identity of the victim. There is much less thematic coverage, which looks into the context of an action: Why do things happen? What is the background? Is

there a larger theme to what happened? I think that this tendency to focus on the specific case rather than on the whole theme has increased in recent times.

There has been much less foreign reporting since the end of the Cold War. American news coverage of events abroad has decreased dramatically. Yet even during the Cold War there was a lack of contextual coverage, particularly when themes did not fit into the Cold War conflict between the two power blocs. Following the Iran hostage crisis, Columbia University professor Edward Said, a leading scholar on the Middle East, made a great point in his book *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* which I think we need to heed:

Muslims and Arabs are essentially covered, discussed, apprehended either as oil suppliers or as potential terrorists. Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arab-Muslim life has entered the awareness of even those people whose profession it is to report the Islamic world.

News consumers in the United States—particularly the vast majority of Americans who receive most of their political news from television—never got a full picture of the developments, the feelings, the problems, and the issues in the Muslim and Arab world. In a way, one could say it was a good result that the American public finally learned a great deal more about this part of the world. But the negative reality is that they learned only because of the events of Black Tuesday.

Legitimacy and Celebrity

Popular support

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In addition to recognition, terrorists also want respectability; they want to increase their legitimacy. With the terrorism of September 11, bin Laden and his associates could not hope to achieve greater legitimacy in their target country. However, I think that their true targets were in the international arena. Bin Laden's esteem increased greatly when the news of the terrorist strikes reached people who were more susceptible to his deeds and preaching. And as the American media began to report on bin Laden as America's number-one enemy, his stock in certain quarters of the Muslim world certainly went up. In that respect, he gained in respectability and legitimacy.

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The American media reported quite extensively about the impact that the terrorism attacks had on people in the Middle East and in the rest of the Muslim world. In particular, they focused on demonstrations that took place in favor of bin Laden and

against the United States. On September 30, the *New York Times*, for example, reported from Karachi that

In every direction of this city of 12 million people, the largest city in a nation that has become a crucial but brittle ally of the United States' war on terrorism, there are cries and signs for Osama bin Laden, for the Taliban, for holy war.

There is no doubt that anti-American and pro-bin Laden demonstrations took place in various parts of the Muslim world. Yet it is also true that what we saw on television in no way reflected what actually happened—the number, size, and intensity of these demonstrations. Television basically gives us only a slice of the whole, reports only one facet of reality.

During the Iran hostage crisis there were many television reports of anti-American demonstrations. Over and over again we saw American flags being burned. By now we know that these anti-American demonstrators basically assembled and became active whenever television crews arrived with their cameras and microphones and got ready to shoot. When they stopped filming, people would mull around and stop protesting; at best you would have one or two blocks filled with protesters. However, people watching in the United States, or anywhere other than the actual protest locations, got the impression that all of Tehran was permanently demonstrating against the United States. Similar misperceptions caused by the media's focus on a few militant protesters have occurred during the coverage of other terrorist events.

Magnified Reality

I'd like to cite some statistics collected by Martin Indyk, a researcher in Washington who tracked the number of anti-American, pro-Laden demonstrations in Arab countries following the October 7 onset of U.S. hostilities in Afghanistan. A former assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, Indyk is now a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. He looked at the level of protesting in 21 Arab countries from North Africa to Yemen in the Persian Gulf. In the first week after the United States began military actions, Indyk found that there were nine pro-Laden, anti-American demonstrations in the region. In week two there were three demonstrations; week three, one demonstration; week four, two demonstrations. In the fifth week, the Taliban leader Mullah Omar called for mass protests, American bombs hit a hospital, and Israeli tanks rolled into the West Bank. During the same week there was not a single demonstration in the surveyed Arab countries. In the following week there was one demonstration.

I think these numbers provide an instructive example of why we must to be careful when we watch television. Television magnifies whatever is being reported. We see

part of the truth and part of the reality, but we do not see the whole reality. I think this problem exists with all media reporting, not just with terrorism coverage or post-terrorism coverage. However, it is particularly instructive in these cases.

Media star

Following the events of September 11, Osama bin Laden basically became a media star. He was the number-one newsmaker for the American media. He probably held a similar place in the media of other countries as well. From September 11 to October 6—before the first U.S. military strikes against Afghanistan—Osama bin Laden was mentioned more frequently on the major television networks (ABC news, CBS news, NBC news, and CNN) than was the president of the United States. On National Public Radio (NPR) and in the *New York Times*, the president had a slight advantage over bin Laden for the frequency of mentions. President Bush's advantage was somewhat larger in the *Washington Post*, but still not particularly large.

These findings are even more surprising when you consider that President Bush addressed the public 54 times in those nearly four weeks. During the same period, bin Laden never spoke directly to the media. He released one videotape to Al-Jazeera, the Arab television network, which then fed the tape to the American networks. Without actively addressing the world, without granting interviews, without making daily statements, he basically received better coverage in American network television than the President of the United States, who took all of those actions.

Certainly the American media did not portray bin Laden as a sympathetic figure—just the opposite. But the tone of the coverage does not matter to a terrorist leader or a terrorist group. They do not care what kind of coverage they receive as long as they get the coverage. They don't want to be loved; they want to be feared. I think the media was very helpful to bin Laden in that respect of spreading fear.

Enemy number one

Another piece of evidence of the American media's fascination, if not obsession, with bin Laden was his presence on the cover of *Time* magazine three times and on the cover of *Newsweek* twice in the ten weeks following the terrorism of September 11. I think we would be hard-pressed to find a precedent of another person on the cover of a major American news magazine three times within a ten-week period.

Admittedly, *Time* magazine put President Bush on its cover twice in the same period. Unlike bin Laden, who was alone on each cover with the image focused on his face, Bush on the first cover was shown with others, rescue workers, at Ground Zero, the site of the World Trade Center disaster. On the second *Time* cover, President Bush was pictured alone. In those ten weeks, *Newsweek* never once featured the presi-

dent on its cover. There is no doubt that the media overcovered bin Laden, paying too much attention to the man they referred to as America's "enemy number one."

Bin Laden was not unknown to the American public before the attacks on New York and Washington. However, I think that the speed of his ascent to the position of number-one newsmaker was unprecedented. In the past, we have had major terrorist figures whom the media made into household names—for example, the Ayatollah Khomeini in the 1970s, Muammar al-Qaddafi in the 1980s, and Saddam Hussein in the early 1990s. (Although Hussein was not primarily associated with terrorism during the Persian Gulf War, he had held foreigners hostage and threatened to use them as human shields before the hostilities had started. He also had one of the terrorists he sponsored threaten the United States and the West with violence in case of an attack on Iraq.) But I think we have reached a completely new level of coverage and recognition with bin Laden.

High Marks for the Media

A new appreciation

With that overview of the media's actual coverage of the events of September 11, I now want to talk about the high marks and the low marks for the media. In the days following the attacks on New York and Washington, the general public's perception of the news media changed dramatically. In the preceding years, the public had become very dissatisfied with the news. In polls, they criticized the news media as being too negative, too cynical, and too aggressive.

The public changed its mind following the attacks of 9/11: Approval ratings for the news media were higher than at any point since such polls had been conducted. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that close to nine in ten Americans approved of the news media in the aftermath of September 11—an amazing turnaround. In view of this crisis, the people and the press began to reconnect. I think the five major reasons for this shift were the media's ability to:

- provide a steady flow of information
- serve as an extension of government
- reveal increased humanity
- provide a public space for communication
- decrease distaste for public grief

Crisis management

First, the public appreciated the steady flow of information they received from the

news media. While they particularly appreciated television and radio reports, they also benefited from the information conveyed by the rest of the media, including Internet sites. The mere fact that people could follow the news after the attacks—see familiar faces on the screen and hear familiar voices on the radio, helped the public to feel as though they were part of the story. They participated in this process of information sharing and appreciated what they saw, heard, and read.

Second, the public appreciated the media—particularly, though not exclusively, their local radio and television stations—for playing a major role in the management of the crisis. This role is not unusual for the media when a major catastrophe (whether manmade or a natural disaster) strikes. In these situations at least part of the media become a kind of extension of the government. Radio and television media in particular grant crisis managers unlimited access, providing them with the opportunity to communicate information directly to the public. The media assumed this role very prominently after the attacks of September 11.

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We all know about Mayor Giuliani's excellent crisis management in New York. Like others in Washington and Pennsylvania, Giuliani used the local media to tell his area's population what to do and what not to do. For example, people in the New York region were told not to try to come into the city because there was no access. All routes to Manhattan, the bridges and tunnels, had been closed. People were told where to donate blood and where they could go to help with other aspects of the rescue effort. They learned what supplies were needed by the rescuers and how to donate them. People who feared that some of their loved ones were directly affected also received critical information. By working through the media, crisis managers such as Giuliani were able to provide a great deal of information to the public—information that the listening audience appreciated.

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Humanity and patriotism

I think the third reason for the increased appreciation that Americans came to have of the media was that they experienced a completely different side of the press. Whether celebrity figures, anchors, well-known correspondents, or the foot soldiers of the fourth estate, the press showed a more human side of themselves to the public. They were less aggressive. They showed that they too were very much affected by the news they were reporting. I think their increased show of humanity helped to create an atmosphere of "we are all in this together." The media and the news consumer were no longer on opposite sides.

People also felt that the media showed an element of patriotism that had previously been absent. Both within and outside the media there were some discussions about

whether it was appropriate to show patriotism—whether reporters and anchors should wear flag pins, and whether networks should show the flag on the screen. In some cases these discussions led to controversies. A few media organizations wrote memos to their personnel advising that they not display the flag in any form. Some advertisers reacted to that decision in a negative way. However, I think such controversies remained a small sub-story and never really spoiled the newfound togetherness that people felt with media figures.

Public communication

The fourth reason for the increased appreciation was that the media provided a public sphere for communication. Through the media, people could communicate with each other, or communicate with experts who could help them deal with the crisis. Immediately after September 11, quite a few television and radio stations organized electronic town-hall meetings. People could participate in the discussion at these meetings by calling in or by sending e-mail messages. Many viewers and listeners appreciated the opportunity to access these forums.

If newspapers and news magazines did not actually expand their letters-to-the-editor sections, they certainly devoted that space for weeks to readers whose comments related to the crisis. These columns provided another opportunity to make use of a public space. I have closely followed letters-to-the-editor sections of the print media for years and I do not remember ever having seen such a full, broad, and diverse public debate as in the weeks and months after September 11.

People also probably appreciated the gatekeeper role served by certain people in the media. Editors, producers, and others filter out certain communications by readers, viewers, and listeners. To fully appreciate that role, compare the letters-to-the-editor sections with Internet chat rooms and discussion boards. None of the online resources I have followed have ever reached the high quality of discourse that occurred in the letters-to-the-editor sections and in the media's electronic town-hall meetings.

Public grief

VIDEO

Finally, the fifth reason for the new appreciation of the media was that viewers, listeners, and readers were spared an aspect of coverage that had bothered many people in the past, particularly when it came in the wake of a major crisis. In reaction to terrorism events in the 1980s, for example, the media relentlessly pursued families of victims in order to get pictures and comments. We came to talk about a pornography of grief in the media, as they insisted on covering these families for hours or days. Some members of the media even stayed on the front lawns of people

who were not willing to talk, waiting until they were forced to leave their homes for some reason. We know from calls and letters that many viewers felt the media's actions in such instances violated the privacy rights of these families.

/VIDEO

The reaction after the events of September 11 was very different. People voluntarily went in front of the cameras and microphones, or spoke freely with representatives of the print press. Even those people who had been directly affected by the crisis—who had been in the buildings that were hit and survived, or who had lost members of their families, friends, or neighbors—spoke openly with the press. People seemed not only willing to talk but even to have a need to share their stories, emotions, and grief in front of large audiences. I think this represents a dramatic turn-around in the popular culture of the United States. Fifteen or twenty years ago it would have been unimaginable that people overcoming a tremendous grief would willingly share their innermost feelings with the public. The media have not changed; the shift has basically occurred in the general public.

The *Wall Street Journal* published an article that criticized the broadcast media for replaying recorded exchanges between people trapped in the World Trade Center towers and the police's 911 center. On these calls, people were crying for help and realizing that there would be none. The tapes are heartbreaking, and they were played again and again by the broadcast media. In response, the *Wall Street Journal* spoke of prime-time pornography in an October 8 editorial:

Can there be anybody on the planet who failed to immediately grasp the full horror of what went on Sept. 11 that they need to hear, over and over, the emotional mayhem of ordinary people trying to cope amidst overwhelming disbelief, fear and terror—not to mention grief? But in our show-and-tell-all culture, there's nothing so private and sensitive that it can't be exposed and sensationalized—especially where ratings are involved.

In one respect, I think, the commentator was right: Journalistic ethics should require consideration for the privacy rights of people. Yet I also think that the general public as well as the media may have become desensitized to public displays of pain and grief, resulting in an overall cultural change. Today, people commonly watch entertainment shows in which individuals bare their innermost feelings and reveal the details of their private life. Many, if not most, people in the public now find such behavior to be normal.

Low Marks for the Media

Constant replay

So far I've focused on the positive points of the media coverage following 9/11, but there were negative aspects as well. Twelve days after the events, Marvin Kidman of *Newsday* wrote the following:

The TV people kept saying incessantly, "This isn't a movie, it's reality." They kept showing those same pictures of the planes hitting, the buildings crumbling. I'm sure if I turned the TV on right now, the buildings would still be crumbling. It never got any better. One picture is worth a thousand words, except in "live" television, where people felt compelled to constantly talk even when they knew very little about what they were talking about."

I think Kidman is right. After the initial excellent news coverage, the media were faced with the problematic reality that there was simply not enough to cover. There was certainly not enough new information to fill 24 hours of television or radio news for days. The producers wound up playing and replaying the images and voices that we had seen and heard before. I think that this constant rebroadcasting magnified the impact of the fear factor.

During this time, the media did abandon the trivial stories that generally make up a great deal of what we call news programming but are in fact infotainment programs. A few days after the events of 9/11, one journalist stated that the press was changing before our eyes. I think he was wrong. No fundamental or lasting change occurred in the media. The media gradually fell back into their habit of focusing on more trivial stories, rather than telling people how the contextual story was unfolding.

Bias

A certain degree of bias was involved in the reporting as well. Arab Americans in particular disliked the numerous replays of an anti-American protest in the Gaza Strip. There actually were people who celebrated in the streets when they heard of the terrorism that had visited the United States. Nobody would have expected the media not to show these pictures either in print or in television. Still, people were upset about the number of times these images appeared, again and again, on the screen.

Often media bias can better be found by looking at what was not covered. In contrast to the celebrations by Palestinians that were replayed again and again, similar outbursts by people elsewhere were either not reported on or were underreported. I

want to share one example. Shortly after the attacks on the United States, a soccer game took place in Athens, Greece. It was the European Cup, a very important game for soccer fans in Europe. When it was announced that there would be a minute of silence to remember the events in New York and Washington, the Greek fans broke out into anti-American demonstrations. They even tried, but failed, to set fire to an American flag. The *New York Times*, within a report on the sports page, ran a few lines about this protest. In my search of practically all the newspapers in the United States, I found only a few examples of reporting on this incident, all of them hidden in a few lines on the sports pages.

The bin Laden tapes

The media coverage, in particular the television coverage, also raised far more important questions about the role of the media in society. Foremost is the issue of the bin Laden videotapes. The al Qaeda organization made these tapes available to al Jazeera, an Arab television network. Al Jazeera in turn provided them to American media organizations, television networks in particular. It was quite remarkable that on October 7—shortly after President Bush had announced in a live, televised statement that the United States had launched military strikes on targets in Afghanistan in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks—all the television networks showed bin Laden responding to the American actions. The networks basically granted the terrorist leader all the access to the American public that he could have wanted.

Eventually the U.S. administration protested, asking the American television networks to refrain from showing the complete videotapes. The administration offered all kinds of explanations for this request. First, they stated that the tapes might contain coded messages signaling terrorists already in the United States or elsewhere in the West to undertake new attacks. This did not seem to be a particularly strong argument. Even if the American television networks never broadcast the statements, the terrorists certainly would have had other means to learn of any body language or word signals used by bin Laden. After all, the tapes were certainly broadcast in the Middle East and other parts of the world. Terrorists located outside the United States would then have had the means to communicate those messages to their fellow U.S.-based terrorists.

I think the stronger argument by the administration was their statement that the American television networks were basically accommodating the propaganda of an enemy of the United States during wartime. Bin Laden and his spokesperson both made explicit threats of additional acts of terrorism, of more hijackings. They even warned Muslims who lived in certain regions not to be in skyscrapers. These drastic threats certainly increased the fear and anxiety felt by the American public. Eventually the networks declared they would not show the full videotapes that they

expected to (and soon thereafter did) receive.

VIDEO

In this scenario the free press's primary responsibility, to fully inform the public, collided with the self-censorship of major news organizations in response to a request by the national government. I think the television networks' first mistake was to relentlessly replay the initial videotaped messages by bin Laden and others in the al Qaeda organization. When the tapes first became available to American news organizations, you could not escape the image of bin Laden looming large on the television screen. Segments began with bin Laden and ended with bin Laden fading away. There was tremendous overcoverage of these tapes at the expense of other important, perhaps more important, news.

The second mistake made by the same networks was to basically refuse to broadcast the full tapes even once. I think the American public is sophisticated enough to understand the meaning of messages sent by these means. I also think the American public should know what threats are being made against it.

/VIDEO

A similar controversy arose over the question of whether or not CNN should submit written questions to bin Laden. Some critics argued that written responses to questions from a news organization was not the correct way to decipher information from a terrorist leader. I have to agree with them. In addition, one would have to insist on a face-to-face interview in this situation. Otherwise, there would be no way to determine who actually answered the questions. Luckily for CNN, the issue faded away. They never received answers to the questions they submitted and the public more or less forgot about the controversy.

Covering Bioterrorism

Worst-case scenarios

A second major question concerned the media's coverage of the bioterrorist threat, and by extension the threat of chemical and nuclear weapons. Very soon after the terrorism events of September 11, the media became what I only can call obsessed with reporting about the possibilities for even worse acts of terrorism to visit the United States. The television news programs were particularly biased on this topic. Anchors preferred to interview terrorism experts who believed a major threat existed, who maximized or magnified the threat of biological and chemical terrorism. The anchors made no secret of that fact that they did not want to hear from those who believed the threat to be minor or not immediate.

Even before the first anthrax case was reported, the major television networks as

well as National Public Radio and the leading print press had all extensively covered the biological and chemical terrorism threat. These news reports were created without a single known biological or chemical incident. Even the anthrax threat was specifically covered before a single infection had been identified.

Overcoverage

With all this media coverage, the public became scared even before the threat was realized. Once the first case was known, we saw tremendous news coverage. Hundreds of stories were published and broadcast. Again, the coverage in the print press was even greater than that by television and radio news organizations. The accompanying table details the number of individual anthrax stories. To me, this kind of coverage indicates that the media were waiting for the second shoe to drop; they were waiting for the next, more terrible kind of terrorism to occur. Once the fear became reality and a man in Florida contracted the first case of anthrax, the news coverage of this new terrorist threat became even greater.

VIDEO

I am not advocating that the media should not cover this sort of threat either before or after the fact. However, I do think that the media overcovered this issue both before and after the identification of the first anthrax case. There was absolutely no need for an army of talking heads to relentlessly tell the public what biological and chemical terrors they could face. Of course, whoever sent the anthrax letters chose the right targets: By choosing people in the media, they assured themselves even greater amounts of news coverage than would have otherwise been granted.

/VIDEO

The concern about overcoverage arose not only from people outside the media. A few members of the media also recognized that the coverage of the biological-terrorist threat had gotten out of hand. Robert Samuelson, a political columnist for the *Washington Post*, wrote in his November 7 column that the greatest danger for journalism was that "our new obsession with terrorism will make us its unwitting accomplices." Samuelson was afraid the journalists would become "merchants of fear." He noted that the overcoverage of anthrax exemplified how a relatively minor threat to the public could be escalated by the media. I think Samuelson really hit on something important. He saw that by relentlessly publicizing the story the media had made the threat much greater than it actually was:

The perverse result is that we may become the terrorists' silent allies. Terrorism is not just about death and destruction. It's also about creating fear, sowing suspicion, undermining confidence in public leadership, provoking people—and governments—into doing things that they might not otherwise do. It is an assault as much on our psychology as on our bodies.

I don't think one can make this point much more clearly than Samuelson did in his column. Unfortunately, not many people in the media heeded his advice.

Terrorist guides

Newsweek published a special cover story entitled "Protecting America: What Must Be Done?" It was one of many similar stories discussing potential future terrorist acts. On the cover of the magazine were listed the most likely targets of the next wave of terrorism—airports, chemical plants, dams, food supplies, the Internet, malls, mass transit, nuclear-power plants, planes, post offices, seaports, skyscrapers, stadiums, and so on. The article itself goes into more detail about these targets and why they are the most susceptible to terrorism.

The flip side to such reporting, of course, was that the magazine basically identified the most vulnerable targets in this country. If terrorists did not already know where to strike next, this magazine issue would serve as quite a good guide for planning and action. As I said earlier, *Newsweek's* report was not unique. Many similar reports were published by the media.

The lapsed watchdog

During times of major crisis, particularly those crises concerning foreign policy, it is quite natural for political actors and the news media to take a softer stand on presidents. The role of the president in such situations becomes primarily that of a crisis manager. However, that softer stand does not generally mean that the media abandon all criticism. Rather, they become much more reluctant to express criticism of the president, the administration, or Congress while these leaders are trying to handle the particular crisis.

VIDEO

In the wake of the events of 9/11, a great deal of the media became cheerleaders for the president, his administration, and Congress. They lost their perspective on how to report on our country's leaders. It was a stretch to compare President Bush's speech to a joint session of Congress either to Lincoln speeches at the beginning of the Civil War or to the speeches of Winston Churchill at critical points during World War II. It was even more of a stretch to compare First Lady Laura Bush to Florence Nightingale after Mrs. Bush visited New York. Reporters have to learn their history in order to make better comparisons.

/VIDEO

The media lost their balance in the wake of horrific terrorist attacks and lost their primary role as a watchdog of government. Nobody expected or desired the media to

be an attack dog in such a situation. As I previously mentioned, much of the public had become disillusioned with the media because of their prior attack-dog stance. In the long run, however, the public is better served by a watchdog than by a cheer-leading media. The House of Representatives decided to stop all work when the first anthrax spores were discovered in its offices—before anyone had become infected. At the same time, government officials told the public not to worry. Similarly, postal workers were told by health officials and by officials of the postal service to continue going to work, even though anthrax had been found in postal facilities in New Jersey, New York, and Washington. There was no outcry in the media about Congress closing down, but postal employees had to keep working. I think that silence represented a great lapse in the watchdog role of the media.

The watchdog awakens

This media's cheerleading began to change in late October, just as opinion polls signaled the public's growing uneasiness with the handling of the domestic, or anthrax, portion of the crisis. (The public's discomfort did not extend at that time to the Bush administration's management of the foreign crisis or to the actions it was taking abroad.) The first media voices raised in criticism focused on Washington's crisis-management skills. For example, John Schwartz wrote in the October 28 *New York Times* that critics of the administration blamed the lackluster response on:

- a lack of communication between agencies
- a lack of preparedness on the part of Tommy G. Thompson, secretary of health and human services (a former governor of Wisconsin, Thompson had little background in medicine or science)
- the tendency of officials to respond to the biological threat in the same way they would respond to a political problem

Schwartz's criticism was quite compelling. He basically told his readers that the administration did not have the crisis in its grasp. With time, the media reported more of this sort of story. I think that the reappearance of critical voices in the mass media was a good sign. Even the most devastating acts of terrorism that the world had ever seen had not managed to silence the American watchdog press for long.

Conclusion

A marriage of convenience

All told, the mainstream media and terrorism are not bedfellows but partners in a marriage of convenience. The events of 9/11 demonstrated clearly how terrorists use the media to achieve their goals of publicity, recognition, and legitimacy. While the American public greatly appreciated the communication functions that the media

performed during this crisis, many individual Americans fell prey to an increased level of fear and anxiety caused at least in part by the media's overcoverage of the events and their penchant for presenting worst-case scenarios.

VIDEO

By accommodating terrorists and their propaganda scheme, news organizations serve the needs and the purposes of their corporate bosses and investors. The perennial hunt for larger audiences, advertising dollars, and, ultimately, profits leads corporate media institutions to dictate that special attention be paid to those events, developments, and people most prone to fit the infotainment bill. Infotainment is believed to bring the highest ratings and the greatest circulation, and there is no doubt that extraordinary crimes, extraordinary acts of terrorism, as well as the mere threat of terrorism all fit the bill of infotainment. The other side of this coin is that when so much attention is given to terrorism—not just the events of 9/11, but terrorism in general—many important events remain either undercovered or not covered at all.

/VIDEO