

JOURNALISM AFTER SEPTEMBER 11



Edited by
BARBIE ZELIZER
and **STUART ALLAN**

With a foreword by
VICTOR NAVASKY



"The best critique yet of how the media responded to September 11, 2001."

Jon Snow, Channel 4 News

"This is not a book just for journalists but for everyone concerned about democracy, freedom of speech and our future."

Phillip Knightley, author of The First Casualty

The events of September 11 continue to resonate in powerful, yet sometimes unexpected ways. For many journalists, the crisis has decisively recast their sense of the world around them. Familiar notions

of what it means to be a journalist, how best to practice journalism, and what the public can reasonably expect of journalists in the name of democracy, have been shaken to their foundations.

Journalism After September 11 examines how the traumatic attacks of that day continue to transform the nature of journalism, particularly in the United States and Britain. It brings together an internationally respected group of scholars and media commentators to explore journalism's present and future by engaging with such pressing issues as trauma, free speech, censorship, patriotism, impartiality, and celebrity.

Journalism After September 11 raises vitally important questions regarding what journalism can and should look like today. In providing answers, it addresses topics such as: journalism and public life at a time of crisis; broadsheet and tabloid newspaper coverage of the attacks; the role of sources in shaping the news; reporting by global news media such as CNN; Western representations of Islam; current affairs broadcasting; news photography and trauma; the emotional well-being of reporters; online journalism; as well as a host of pertinent issues around news, democracy and citizenship.

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“The subtlest change in New York is something people don’t speak much about but that is in everyone’s mind. The city, for the first time in its long history, is destructible. A single flight of planes no bigger than a wedge of geese can quickly end this island fantasy, burn the towers, crumble the bridges, turn the underground passages into lethal chambers, cremate the millions. The intimation of mortality is part of New York now: in the sounds of jets overhead, in the black headlines of the latest edition.”

E. B. White, 1949

This book is dedicated to the memory of all those
lost in the events of September 11, 2001

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FOREWORD

Victor Navasky

We know what the journalism we witnessed in the aftermath of the event of September 11 had to tell us about terrorism and terrorists, Osama Bin Laden and the al-Qaeda, the Mayor of New York City, Islamic fundamentalism, the architecture of the World Trade Center, airport security, the condition of intelligence agencies, President Bush's so-called war on terrorism, striking the balance between the constitutional guarantees of civil liberty and the imperatives of national safety, the impact of trauma on civil society, Americans' amazing capacity to make a buck off tragedy, the pros and cons of military justice and secret tribunals, and a host of other issues and matters of community, local, state, national, and global concern. But what did it have to tell us about journalism itself? That, as much as *Journalism after September 11*, is the real subject of this book. The subject is an important one because journalism, the flow of news, information, and ideas, is the circulation system of our democracy, the way we find out what's what. It is based largely on journalism that we make up our national mind.

It would be a mistake to minimize the difficulties the media faced covering the uniquely traumatic and unprecedented events of September 11 and their aftermath. And it would be a mistake not to recognize, as James Carey and other contributors to this volume do, some of the signal journalistic achievements of the *New York Times* and others in crisis mode.

Nevertheless, the post-September 11 journalism to be found in most mainstream media including both reportage and analysis reflected a number of ideological assumptions: That this was a time for rallying around the flag and that those who questioned national policy were giving aid and comfort to the enemy; that any attempt to link the events of September 11 to America's previous role in the Middle East or elsewhere was unworthy of serious coverage or consideration and somehow smacked of apologetics; that (despite much rhetoric about all Muslims being entitled to the presumption of innocence) the demonization of the Muslim world indulged in by the American press over recent decades had been vindicated (see especially Karim H. Karim on the centuries old Western genealogy of the Muslim Other, and Annabelle Sreberny on the "manufacture of the collective we").

Now of course it can be argued that the journalism incited by the events of September 11 was the exception and hence it would be a mistake to attempt any generalization based on it; or that this journalism in the penumbra of trauma—journalism in an emergency, “America under Attack” 24-hours-a-day journalism with its full-court press and wall-to-wall coverage—revealed the underlying values and assumptions of journalism as it is routinely practiced in the United States.

I would contend that the journalism practiced in the aftermath of September 11 was a little bit of both. And I would argue that while Ingrid Volkmer may indeed be right and a new global public sphere will make possible “a new world order,” and while Barbie Zelizer makes an effective case for her contention that pictures played a crucial role in enabling the public to bear witness, some of the particular assumptions underlying September 11 coverage are peculiar to the episode. There are a number of longer-range extra-curricular factors which help define the cultural context within which the traumatic events of September 11 played out and which may have imposed invisible constraints on the journalists and journalistic organizations doing their best to report on the world around them. (I refer here to the “straight” media and not the tabs, which S. Elizabeth Bird notes routinely tackle questions that respectable journalists omit but discuss over lunch, such as did sexual rejection lead Bin Laden to hate America?)

First, there is media concentration, the new consolidation. For some years now scholars like Ben Bagdikian and Robert McChesney have been tracking how fewer and fewer corporations dominate more and more of the media landscape.

When Bagdikian first started keeping track in 1983 he counted something like 50 corporations which controlled more than half of all of the information, knowledge, and entertainment companies in the USA. He republished his book in 1987 and the number was down to 27. Now it is under ten. Usually people who cite these figures do so to lament that so much power is in the hands of so few. But my point here has less to do with power than with homogenization, the promulgation and recycling of the same, corporate and government-dominated messages. It becomes more and more difficult to hear minority voices in this majority thunder, Bagdikian said.

According to McChesney—and one needn’t agree with his political analysis of the media system (he sees reporters as stenographers to power) to recognize the accuracy of his observation—“What is most striking in the US news coverage following the September 11 attacks is how that very debate over whether to go to war, or how best to respond, did not even exist.” The picture conveyed by big media across the board was as follows: “A benevolent, democratic, and peace loving nation was brutally attacked by insane evil terrorists who hate the United States for its freedoms and affluent way of life. The United States must immediately increase its military and covert forces, locate the surviving culprits and exterminate them; then prepare for a long-term war to root out the global terrorist cancer and destroy it.”

Stuart Allan adds that on the Web, one of the reasons the “diversity of view-

points has been steadily diminishing in the aftermath of the crisis” has to do with the constraints imposed by the increasingly consolidated Internet Service Providers or ISPs.

A number of contributors to this volume add that in recent years network and newspaper overseas budgets have been slashed and correspondents reduced. Thus a corollary consequence of the new concentration and consolidation, i.e. the “market logic,” is a new ignorance on the part of the US citizenry of the realities of other peoples, and countries, their politics, cultures, and beliefs.

A second factor has to do with the myth of objectivity. No sophisticated student of the press believes that objective journalism is possible. The best one can hope for is fairness, balance, neutrality, detachment. Nevertheless, opinion journalists like myself are thought to be ideological and as such, second-class citizens in the republic of journalism. (See also the interesting discussion by Howard Tumber on such matters as can the war correspondent ever be a disinterested observer?)

My own belief is that yes, a magazine like *The Nation* has the ideology of the left and yes, a magazine like Bill Buckley’s *National Review* has the ideology of the right. But that mainstream institutions like the *New York Times*, the television networks, the news weeklies are no less ideological. They have the ideology of the center and it is part of the ideology of the center to deny that it has an ideology.

But when a traumatic event like what happened on September 11 occurs, the mainstream media show their colors. Consider Dan Rather, among the most ethical of anchors, on the David Letterman show: “George Bush is the President, he makes the decisions, and, you know, as just one American, he wants me to line up, just tell me where. And he’ll make the call.” Rather also explained to Letterman that the terrorists attacked us “because they’re evil, and because they’re jealous of us.”

Thus in times of trauma not only are the mainstream media not in fact as objective as they claim to be, but also they tend to internalize the official line. Michael Schudson has noted that there are three conditions under which dissent and the ideal of objectivity are suspended: Tragedy, danger, and a threat to national security. September 11 represented all three.

Perhaps it is natural to rally round the flag in times of trouble. My problem is not with patriotism per se, but with the jingoistic brand of patriotism promulgated by the media, patriotism which says “my country right or wrong.” Thus when National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice famously got the heads of all the network news divisions on the line and asked that they think twice before running any more Bin Laden tapes, instead of objecting to this blatant and unprecedented government intrusion or reciting the press’ traditional mantra about fairness and the obligation to present both sides, they all caved in to her request.

Jay Rosen reminds us of what happened when the head of ABC News spoke at the Columbia Journalism School not long after September 11. ABC News

president David Westin was asked whether he considered the Pentagon to be a legitimate target for attack by America's enemies. His response was "I actually don't have an opinion on that . . . as a journalist I feel strongly that is something I should not be taking a position on."

The next day the right-wing attack machine, Rupert Murdoch's Fox network, the Scaife-funded Media Research Center, the *New York Post*, Matt Drudge and Rush Limbaugh all piled on, and Westin capitulated. "I was wrong," he said. "Under any interpretation the attack on the Pentagon was criminal and entirely without justification." Thus he dropped the façade of objectivity when his patriotism was questioned.

Jay Rosen suggests that Westin changed his mind because his consciousness was raised.

As a journalist, or a boss of journalists, he was speaking favorably of objectivity, which is a little like a Republican Party official speaking favorably of the free enterprise system. What Westin did not appreciate is how completely the events of September 11 wiped out the normal boundaries separating the professional position of the journalist from the personal (indeed emotional) position of an American citizen. Speaking as a journalist, someone entitled to stand outside the political community, had become a morally hazardous act, whereas before it had been one of the safer places from which to answer a question about news. News from nowhere was not a very thinkable thing after September 11; and this had a disorienting effect.

Perhaps, although I would argue that any meaningful notion of patriotism ought to incorporate the right to dissent as a core value, that the First Amendment's protection of dissent and dissenters is what defines and distinguishes the United States as a nation. (See Silvio Waisbord's interesting chapter on the social climate in which mainstream journalism "opted to ignore dissent" and avoided questioning the dangers of exuberant patriotism.)

But in the aftermath of September 11 the national media have confused the questioning of official policy with disloyalty. For example one finds former *New Republic* editor Andrew Sullivan attacking *Nation* columnist Katha Pollitt because she wrote that war is the wrong way to solve the problem. But instead of dealing with her argument, he denounces her as a part of a "decadent left [which] may well mount a fifth column" and accuses her of supporting the Taliban.

This articulation of the Bush ethic—you are either for us or against us, "watch what you say" as his press secretary ominously put it—raises a fourth extra-curricular factor: The press' internalization of the Bush administration's ethic of secrecy. I don't mean to make a political argument here. Increased security may indeed require increased secrecy. But whether it does or not, the Bush administration has given us a cult of secrecy as the environment within which post-September 11 journalism has been operating. Its hallmark has been

anti-openness, systematic unwillingness to trust the people with what has hitherto been public information.

The administration has issued an executive order blocking the routine release of previous Presidents' papers. Vice President Cheney refused so many requests from Congress's general accounting office for information about his secret meetings with energy executives that for the first time in history the agency sued the administration. Attorney General John Ashcroft reversed the Freedom of Information Act presumption that documents would be withheld only where harm would come from their disclosure. For the first time in history the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare was given the power to classify meetings. The *New York Times* has reported that the media was being frozen out of military operations far more than in any recent conflict. There are the secret military tribunals, the nameless prisoners being held in Guantanamo, and the so-called shadow government, a cadre of 200 senior officials said to be working outside the nation's capital in two secret locations. There is the aborted "Office of Strategic Influence," a plan to have the Pentagon join the CIA in putting out disinformation against foreign governments and the press. (You may say, well, at least we blocked that one. I would say that we think we blocked it. Since we now know that they are committed to lying as a matter of official policy why should we believe them when they tell us they have dropped the plan? Get with the program!)

There is the round-up and detention of foreign nationals held incommunicado, which has promoted a new alliance between the civil libertarian left and the libertarian right. Rumsfeld told reporters recently that he understands "the need to provide the press and through you, the American people" with the fullest possible information. Defending the American way is what the war in Afghanistan is all about, he said, "and that certainly includes freedom of the press." As Neal Hickey wrote in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, "it depends on what the meaning of the word 'freedom' is."

Conglomeration, the myth of objectivity, the misunderstanding of patriotism and the Bush administration's ethic of secrecy. Collectively, the convergence of these four factors has compromised the free flow of information, and the ability of journalism to do its job. Having said that, I should add that the situation would be less problematic were it not for a fifth factor or perhaps I should say the absence of a fifth factor: The loyal opposition. In the face of massive intrusions on the public's right to know, the Democratic Party and its principal leaders have been acquiescent and silent. It is true that the intervention of Senator Leahy and others has rendered the so-called USA Patriot Act of 2001 somewhat less draconian than it might otherwise have been. But after Attorney General Ashcroft warned that additional terrorist acts were imminent and Congress would be to blame if the bill were not passed immediately, the Democrats went along. So a piece of deeply troubling legislation was enacted with no public hearings, no mark up by the Senate, no meaningful floor debate, no committee reports that explain the bill and no real conference between the two houses.

In a system where the press reports the activities and assertions of those in power, there was nothing to report and so the press, like the (non-existent) overly “loyal” opposition, was silent.

If, indeed, national security, national safety or even the right to privacy means a cut-back in the traditional interpretation of Bill of Rights guarantees, one would hope that on such occasions the press, through exuberant exercise of its watch-dog franchise, would by its reportage protect the public from official abuse of its prerogatives.

These, then, are only some of the assumptions and factors, ideological and sociological, which seem to me to infect and affect journalists and journalism in the aftermath of September 11. My ruminations on them, like the chapters which follow, are intended to be the beginning rather than the end of the story. Although many of the examples here are site specific, the issues raised cross geographic, cultural, and political boundaries. How much for example do different approaches to news reflect “market requirements”? (See Michael Bromley and Stephen Cushion’s comparison of the difference between the approach of Britain’s “heretical” *Mirror* and its “unreformed” *Sun*.) How do television formats determine content and thereby shape public discourse? Simon Cottle offers an important analysis.

Given the complexity of the issues under inspection and the diversity of the subjects covered in what follows, it is a tribute to the editors of this volume that they seem to have encouraged its contributors to raise questions even where there are no answers. That way lies not only better journalism but the possibility of an expanded moral imagination.

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INTRODUCTION

When trauma shapes the news

Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan

It was once said that journalism takes on its true colors when the world outside darkens, when prospects turn bleak and hope shrinks. It is no surprise, then, that the events of September 11 have already begun to recast expectations of journalism in the Western world. Shaken to their foundation have been familiar notions of what it means to be a journalist, how best to practice journalism, and what different publics can reasonably expect of journalists in the name of democracy.

September 11 has decisively transformed the everyday contexts within which many journalists routinely operate. Evidence of this transformation is everywhere, not least with regard to the struggle to negotiate the complexities of the crisis in a suitably fair or balanced manner. News organizations—together with their sources—lacked a readymade “script” to tell their stories, a frame to help them and their audiences comprehend the seemingly incomprehensible. From the perspective of today, of course, it is easier to discern the emergence and embodiment of the responses they crafted and the interests they sought to advance. Far less clear, however, is what their lasting impact will be for journalism in a post-September 11 world.

Journalism after September 11 addresses these and related questions. It explores not only the subjunctive dimensions of journalistic form, content, and practice—how journalism *should* look in its new environment—but indicative ones as well—how it *does* look—and in so doing tackles a range of pressing issues. In pondering journalism’s imperatives following the events that rattled the world, the book’s contributors consider the emergent capacity of those invested with helping to give the events voice. At the heart of this discussion is a notion not previously addressed in scholarship on journalism, namely that of trauma. Frequently invoked as a label for a wide range of cognitive-emotional states caused by suffering and existential pain, it is our belief that journalists and news organizations covering the events of September 11 were wounded too. There were no detached vantage-points situated “outside” the crisis from which they could objectively observe. And indeed, as we have seen in the months that have since passed, trauma does not disappear lightly. It lingers, seems to fade, and then