

A Review of Media Representations of September 11

By

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Book: *Media Representations of September 11*

Author(s): Editors – Steven Chermak, Frankie Y. Bailey, and Michelle Brown

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First I examine the positive aspects of *Media Representations of September 11*, and then I turn to some of the shortcomings of the book. Through a variety of methodological approaches and authors guided by a single mission, the editors have produced a convincing analysis of American media's portrayal and interpretation of 9/11. The main conclusion is that U.S. and British media led to the inescapable reality that the American nation's (and British) response to 9/11 was war. Alternatives to a war response were drowned out by the media's complicity with a culture that yields no other response.

I begin by examining the authors' look at media representations of 9/11. At the end of the review, I attempt to draw a conclusion to what has been discussed, a task that was not adequately undertaken by the editors. In the introductory chapter, the editors summarize that, "...these dominant media narratives express a distinctly superficial quality ...and a puzzling unanimity and even monotony...marked by the emergence of dominant hegemonic agendas of super patriotism and militarism... and the offering of a fairly limited world view, one that tends to support a dominant political ideology...." (p. 5). The authors find a moralistic, dissentless, healing movement toward a military response.

As an example of the biased media response, John Strawson indicates that media discussion of Jihad (Holy War) is distinctly one-sided in that it is presented as war oriented. To the contrary, another interpretation of "jihad" is that it is a struggle of the individual to do what is right and does not entail violence (Strawson, p. 21).

Advertising contributed to a nationalistic response that restricted a discussion of our foreign policy response to 9/11 (Campbell, p. 49). The advertising industry was shown to have supported an intensely patriotic response. Even the *New York Times* is accused of contributing to a national myth of good versus evil and, in this case, the myth of America as a victim and in need of vengeance (Campbell, pp. 50-51).

Through its use of "trauma" response, the media is accused of invoking a ritualized practice that fabricated the reality of 9/11 (Breithaupt, pp. 67-68). The "trauma" theme is the media's propensity to infantilize news coverage. Hurt leads to

therapy which, in this case, would be an eye for an eye response (e.g., war). As Breithaupt (p. 81) puts it, "It leaves a Ritnalized Nation [a traumatized nation] without agency and without access to its wishes and thus imprisoned by shame."

The analysis of CNN's coverage is particularly insightful and damaging to the media's unidimensional response to 9/11. Reynolds and Barnett dig into the mass media's use of framing to present the news. The idea of "framing" or creating an "angle" is that news agencies must fit the news into common themes that are dominant in our culture (see Dye & Zeigler, 1989, pp.100-101). An "angle" could be good versus evil. In the case of 9/11, certainly Osama Bin Laden is evil and America is good. CNN relied on government sources, all of whom referred to war as the appropriate response to 9/11. A second frame was national unity. Thirdly, justification for a military response was invoked. Government officials quoted by the media ranged from President George W. Bush to Senator Hillary Clinton and former Secretary of Defense and State, Lawrence Eagleburger, all of whom called for a military response.

Reynolds and Barnett are careful to point out: "We do not mean to suggest that CNN was conspiring with officials to create this frame [war response]" (Reynolds & Barnett, p. 101), but they conclude in extremely strong words that 9/11 coverage was warped "because of a fundamental flaw in the corporate conglomerate culture within which American mass media operate today" (Reynolds & Barnett, p. 101). Debate was stifled. For example, advocates of pacifism or any type of criticism were absent.

The most surprising chapter dealt with Internet news reporting. The Internet often is touted as a vehicle for democratic debate. However, upon close analysis it is shown to be deficient in this regard. The great digital divide showing Asians and Whites using the Internet far more than Blacks and Hispanics is only one element of possible anti-democratic trends. Brown, Fuzesi, Kitch, and Spivey reveal that the Internet failed to bring a diversity of views to 9/11. In fact, based on their careful analysis, they argue that the Internet is static (picks a theme) and, in this case, picks a "frame" similar to the mass print and electronic media that is deeply embedded in America's mythology. Furthermore, the Internet is consumerist oriented resulting in simplistic, single theme content. As opposed to destroying the nature of traditional media, the Internet reflects the mainstream. This chapter represents a welcome contribution to the academic inquiry into the effects of the Internet on communications in contemporary society.

Many other studies generally illustrate the Internet's tendency to reflect not only the dominant news media's biases, but powerful political institutions such as political parties. A Dutch study shows that successful political party web sites on the Internet are the political parties already in power (Dekker & in 't Veld, 2005, pp. 41-67).

The British national press is shown to yield the same result as the U.S. media. British media is more ownership centralized than U.S. media. Via such vehicles as Rupert Murdoch's the Sun (Murdoch owns Fox media enterprises in the U.S.), media in the United Kingdom is consensual and consumer oriented. The British press is in step with U.S. mass media in creating a "dumbed down" environment for a military response to

9/11. Wykes (p. 125) argues that “Britain is perceived to be at risk,” meaning that the United Kingdom is viewed by the media to be just as subject to terrorist attacks as the United States.

The remainder of the book is devoted to research that fits the book’s theme. Memorializing 9/11 is much like the Oklahoma City bombing and, again, has a traumatic frame. The examination of popular narratives in the remaining chapters reflects on the themes of iconic flags, real people heroes, personal biographies that sometimes deviated from media unity, and songs that reflected grief and patriotism.

The book is convincing in that media representations of 9/11 portrayed the dominant American culture and largely eliminated discussion – in short it was a monologue not a dialogue. The message is that the media manipulated us into war. The book is essentially descriptive and, in this respect, is a valuable contribution. However, it fails to move onto perhaps fragile ground. Do the media need to change their style? Is American culture wrong? Where do the media need to go in changing their reporting? Let us briefly attempt to address some of these questions. The bad news is that the authors fall into an academic mantra heard and read over and over again in education. The media usually gets a negative evaluation from academia. It is not that the academic community should not be media’s critic. This is an essential role of education in our society. Robert Entman, Thomas Patterson (see Patterson, 2000), and other university professors all lament the “dumbing down” of the media. And so they should.

There are, however, certain realities about the media in America. A free media exists in a free society by being financially and ideologically independent of government (Fox News is somewhat partisan). This independence means that the media are profit oriented and probably in the environment of increased competition are “dumbing down” the news in a highly competitive market. This means that the big, successful media must be in the cultural mainstream. This is an important point, because it means that the media do reflect the mainstream culture and do not fabricate it or warp it out of shape as is charged in the book.

The one chapter in the book that did not show a segment of the media as being capable of producing a patriotic, war atmosphere is the Mukherjee chapter on Black press. In the section, *The Black American As Witness, Conscience, and Keeper*, it is pointed out that an element of America’s Black press blamed 9/11 and, in fact, the training of not only Osama Bin Laden, but Saddam Hussein and Manuel Noreiga, on the U.S. (Mukherjee, pp. 36-37). This Black press cautioned America not to forget our history of “oppressions, brutalities, and terrorism....” (Mukherjee, p. 39). The suggestion is that American unity in the face of 9/11 and concomitant abuse of Arab civil rights was a jettisoning of the gains made in the 1960s (Mukherjee, p. 45).

The chapter on Black press is a critical one. Although the Black press has little voice in American mainstream press, it should be paid attention to, especially during times of relative hysteria. It may be up to education, through books such as *Media*

Representations of September 11, to reintroduce caution to mainstream society. Thus, the role of academic criticism is essential to a democratic society.

Prior to World War II, Americans were isolationist in foreign affairs. After World War II we have been internationalist. Pearl Harbor seems to have led the American people to conclude that they cannot ignore world affairs. It is difficult to conceive that Americans could have interpreted 9/11 in any other way than our reaction to Pearl Harbor. Waging war against the Taliban government in Afghanistan was even joined by the German government with a favorable vote in the Bundestag to send troops. Pacifists within the Green party were overridden by Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder. The Taliban harbored Osama Bin Laden. The reaction to 9/11, not only in America but in Europe, was roughly similar. But, Iraq is another story.

Media Representations of September 11 is an excellent look at American media coverage of a catastrophic event in American history. The media war oriented response was understandable and probably reflected mainstream U.S. culture. The chapter that needs widespread attention is the Black press voice urging us not to forget the civil rights of all Americans, which could be damaged in the wake of 9/11. Our media are not a political party propaganda machine as in the former Soviet Union or in the Peoples Republic of China today. Nor have they been rendered mute as during the military dictatorship during the dirty war in the 1970s and early 1980s in Argentina. We have a free press, but it can and does have its problems. Let's keep on them to do a good job of being governments' and societies' watchdog.

As a final conclusion, I commend the authors for accurately documenting U.S. media coverage of 9/11, though I offer a different interpretation of this coverage. The authors maintain that the internal dynamics of the media industry produced a media led U.S. war mentality as a response to 9/11. Another possibility is that a profit oriented media reflected U.S. culture. The appropriateness of this response may be open to question, especially with regard to minority rights. It may be the suitable role of academics to document and question U.S. media.

ENDNOTE

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