The Worldflash of a Coming Future

- Alex Burns
- Respond To This Article

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History is not over and that includes media history.
Jay Rosen (Zelizer & Allan 33)

The media in their reporting on terrorism tend to be judgmental, inflammatory, and sensationalistic. — Susan D. Moeller (169)

In short, we are directed in time, and our relation to the future is different than our relation to the past. All our questions are conditioned by this asymmetry, and all our answers to these questions are equally conditioned by it. Norbert Wiener (44)

The Clash of Geopolitical Pundits

1 America’s geo-strategic engagement with the world underwent a dramatic shift in the decade after the Cold War ended. United States military forces undertook a series of humanitarian interventions from northern Iraq (1991) and Somalia (1992) to NATO’s bombing campaign on Kosovo (1999). Wall Street financial speculators embraced market-oriented globalization and technology-based industries (Friedman 1999). Meanwhile the geo-strategic pundits debated several different scenarios at deeper layers of epistemology and macrohistory including the breakdown of nation-states (Kaplan), the ‘clash of civilizations’ along religiopolitical fault-lines (Huntington) and the fashionable ‘end of history’ thesis (Fukuyama).

2 Media theorists expressed this geo-strategic shift in reference to the ‘CNN Effect’: the power of real-time media ‘to provoke major responses from domestic audiences and political elites to both global and national events’ (Robinson 2). This media ecology is often contrasted with ‘Gateholder’ and ‘Manufacturing Consent’ models. The ‘CNN Effect’ privileges humanitarian and non-government organisations whereas the latter models focus upon the conformist mind-sets and shared worldviews of government and policy decision-makers.

3 The September 11 attacks generated an uncertain interdependency between the terrorists, government officials, and favourable media coverage. It provided a test case, as had the humanitarian interventions (Robinson 37) before it, to test the claim by proponents that the ‘CNN Effect’ had policy leverage during critical stress points. The attacks also revived a long-running debate in media circles about the risk factors of global media. McLuhan (1964) and Ballard (1990) had prophesied that the global media would pose a real-time challenge to decision-making processes and that its visual imagery would have unforeseen psychological effects on viewers. Wark (1994) noted that journalists who covered real-time events including the Wall Street crash (1987) and collapse of the Berlin Wall (1989) were traumatised by their ‘virtual’ geographies.

The ‘War on Terror’ as 21st Century Myth

4 Three recent books explore how the 1990s humanitarian interventions and the September 11 attacks have remapped this ‘virtual’ territory with all too real consequences. Piers Robinson’s The CNN Effect (2002) critiques the theory and proposes the policy-media interaction model. Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan’s anthology Journalism After September 11 (2002) examines how September 11 affected the journalists who covered it and the implications for news values. Sandra Silberstein’s War of Words (2002) uncovers how strategic language framed the U.S. response to September 11. Robinson provides the contextual background; Silberstein contributes the specifics; and Zelizer and Allan surface broader perspectives. These books offer insights into the social construction of the nebulous War on Terror and why certain images and trajectories were chosen at the expense of other possibilities.

5 Silberstein locates this world-historical moment in the three-week transition between September 11’s aftermath and the U.S. bombings of Afghanistan’s Taliban regime. Descriptions like the ‘War on Terror’ and ‘Axis of Evil’ framed the U.S. military response, provided a conceptual justification for the bombings, and also brought into being the geo-strategic context for other nations. The crucial element in this process was when U.S. President George W. Bush adopted a pedagogical style for his public speeches, underpinned by the illusions of communal symbols and shared meanings (Silberstein 6-8).
Bush’s initial address to the nation on September 11 invoked the ambiguous pronoun ‘we’ to recreate ‘a unified nation, under God’ (Silberstein 4). The 1990s humanitarian interventions had frequently been debated in Daniel Hallin’s sphere of ‘legitimate controversy’; however the grammar used by Bush and his political advisers located the debate in the sphere of ‘consensus’. This brief period of enforced consensus was reinforced by the structural limitations of North American media outlets. September 11 combined ‘tragedy, public danger and a grave threat to national security’, Michael Schudson observed, and in the aftermath North American journalism shifted ‘toward a prose of solidarity rather than a prose of information’ (Zelizer & Allan 41). Debate about why America was hated did not go much beyond Bush’s explanation that ‘they hated our freedoms’ (Silberstein 14). Robert W. McChesney noted that alternatives to the ‘war’ paradigm were rarely mentioned in the mainstream media (Zelizer & Allan 93).

A new myth for the 21st century had been unleashed.

The Cycle of Integration Propaganda

Journalistic prose masked the propaganda of social integration that atomised the individual within a larger collective (Ellul). The War on Terror was constructed by geopolitical pundits as a Manichean battle between ‘an “evil” them and a national us’ (Silberstein 47). But the national crisis made ‘us’ suddenly problematic.

Resurgent patriotism focused on the American flag instead of Constitutional rights. Debates about military tribunals and the USA Patriot Act resurrected the dystopian fears of a surveillance society. New York City mayor Rudy Guiliani suddenly became a leadership icon and Time magazine awarded him Person of the Year (Silberstein 92). Guiliani suggested at the Concert for New York on 20 October 2001 that ‘New Yorkers and Americans have been united as never before’ (Silberstein 104). Even the series of Public Service Announcements created by the Ad Council and U.S. advertising agencies succeeded in blurring the lines between cultural tolerance, social inclusion, and social integration (Silberstein 108-16).

In this climate the in-depth discussion of alternate options and informed dissent became thought-crimes. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni’s report Defending Civilization: How Our Universities are Failing America (2002), which singled out “blame America first” academics, ignited a firestorm of debate about educational curriculums, interpreting history, and the limits of academic freedom. Silberstein’s perceptive analysis surfaces how ACTA assumed moral authority and collective misunderstandings as justification for its interrogation of internal enemies. The errors she notes included presumed conclusions, hasty generalisations, bifurcated worldviews, and false analogies (Silberstein 133, 135, 139, 141). Op-ed columnists soon exposed ACTA’s gambit as a pre-packaged witch-hunt. But newscasters then channel-skipped into military metaphors as the Afghanistan campaign began.

The weeks after the attacks New York City sidewalk traders moved incense and tourist photos to make way for World Trade Center memorabilia and anti-Osama shirts. Chevy and Ford morphed September 11 catchphrases (notably Todd Beamer’s last words “Let’s Roll” on Flight 93) and imagery into car advertising campaigns (Silberstein 124-5). American self-identity was finally reasserted in the face of a domestic recession through this wave of vulgar commercialism.

The ‘Simulated’ Fall of Elite Journalism

For Columbia University professor James Carey the ‘failure of journalism on September 11’ signaled the ‘collapse of the elites of American journalism’ (Zelizer & Allan 77). Carey traces the rise-and-fall of adversarial and investigative journalism from the Pentagon Papers and Watergate through the intermediation of the press to the myopic self-interest of the 1988 and 1992 Presidential campaigns. Carey’s framing echoes the earlier criticisms of Carl Bernstein and Hunter S. Thompson. However this critique overlooks several complexities.

Piers Robinson cites Alison Preston’s insight that diplomacy, geopolitics and elite reportage defines itself through the sense of distance from its subjects. Robinson distinguished between two reportage types: distance framing ‘creates emotional distance’ between the viewers and victims whilst support framing accepts the ‘official policy’ (28). The upsurge in patriotism, the vulgar commercialism, and the mini-cycle of memorabilia and publishing all combined to enhance the support framing of the U.S. federal government. Empathy generated for September 11’s victims was tied to support of military intervention. However this closeness rapidly became the distance framing of the Afghanistain campaign. News coverage recycled the familiar visuals of in-progress bombings and Taliban barbarians. The alternative press, peace movements, and social activists then retaliated against this coverage by reinstating the support framing that revealed structural violence and gave voice to silenced minorities and victims.

What really unfolded after September 11 was not the demise of journalism’s elite but rather the renegotiation of reportage boundaries and shared meanings. Journalists scoured the Internet for
eyewitness accounts and to interview survivors (Zelizer & Allan 129). The same medium was used by others to spread conspiracy theories and viral rumors that numerology predicted the date September 11 or that the “face of Satan” could be seen in photographs of the World Trade Center (Zelizer & Allan 133). Karim H. Karim notes that the Jihad frame of an “Islamic Peril” was socially constructed by media outlets but then challenged by individual journalists who had learnt ‘to question the essentialist bases of her own socialization and placing herself in the Other’s shoes’ (Zelizer & Allan 112). Other journalists forgot that Jihad and McWorld were not separate but two intertwined worldviews that fed upon each other. The September 11 attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center also had deep symbolic resonances for American sociopolitical ideals that some journalists explored through analysis of myths and metaphors.

The Rise of Strategic Geography

However these renegotiated boundaries of new media, multiperspectival frames, and ‘layered’ depth approaches to issues analysis were essentially minority reports. The rationalist mode of journalism was soon reasserted through normative appeals to strategic geography. The U.S. networks framed their documentaries on Islam and the Middle East in bluntly realpolitik terms. The documentary “Minefield: The United States and the Muslim World” (ABC, 11 October 2001) made explicit strategic assumptions of ‘the U.S. as “managing” the region’ and ‘a definite tinge of superiority’ (Silberstein 153). ABC and CNN stressed the similarities between the world’s major monotheistic religions and their scriptural doctrines. Both networks limited their coverage of critiques and dissent to internecine schisms within these traditions (Silberstein 158). CNN also created different coverage for its North American and international audiences.

The BBC was more cautious in its September 11 coverage and more global in outlook. Three United Kingdom specials – Panorama (Clash of Cultures, BBC1, 21 October 2001), Question Time (Question Time Special, BBC1, 13 September 2001), and “War Without End” (War on Trial, Channel 4, 27 October 2001) – drew upon the British traditions of parliamentary assembly, expert panels, and legal trials as ways to explore the multiple dimensions of the ‘War on Terror’ (Zelizer & Allan 180). These debates weren’t free: the programs sanctioned ‘a tightly controlled and hierarchical agora’ through different containment strategies (Zelizer & Allan 183). Program formats, selected experts and presenters, and editorial/on-screen graphics were factors that pre-empted the viewer’s experience and conclusions. The traditional emphasis of news values on the expert was renewed.

These subtle forms of thought-control enabled policy-makers to inform the public whilst inoculating them against terrorist propaganda. However the ‘CNN Effect’ also had counter-offensive capabilities. Osama bin Laden’s videotaped sermons and the al-Jazeera network’s broadcasts undermined the psychological operations maxim that enemies must not gain access to the mindshare of domestic audiences. Ingrid Volkmer recounts how the Los Angeles based National Iranian Television Network used satellite broadcasts to criticize the Iranian leadership and spark public riots (Zelizer & Allan 242). These incidents hint at why the ‘War on Terror’ myth, now unleashed upon the world, may become far more destabilizing to the world system than previous conflicts.

Risk Reportage and Mediated Trauma

When media analysts were considering the ‘CNN Effect’ a group of social contract theorists including Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman, and Ulrich Beck were debating, simultaneously, the status of modernity and the ‘unbounded contours’ of globalization. Beck termed this new environment of escalating uncertainties and uninsurable dangers the ‘world risk society’ (Beck). Although they drew upon constructivist and realist traditions Beck and Giddens ‘did not place risk perception at the center of their analysis’ (Zelizer & Allan 203).

Instead this was the role of journalist as ‘witness’ to Ballard-style ‘institutionalized disaster areas’. The terrorist attacks on September 11 materialized this risk and obliterated the journalistic norms of detachment and objectivity. The trauma ‘destabilizes a sense of self’ within individuals (Zelizer & Allan 205) and disrupts the image-generating capacity of collective societies. Barbie Zelizer found that the press selection of September 11 photos and witnesses re-enacted the ‘Holocaust aesthetic’ created when Allied Forces freed the Nazi internment camps in 1945 (Zelizer & Allan 55-7). The visceral nature of September 11 imagery inverted the trend, from the Gulf War to NATO’s Kosovo bombings, for news outlets to depict war in detached video-game imagery (Zelizer & Allan 253).

Coverage of the September 11 attacks and the subsequent Bali bombings (on 12 October 2002) followed a four-part pattern news cycle of assassinations and terrorism (Moeller 164-7). Moeller found that coverage moved from the initial event to a hunt for the perpetrators, public mourning, and finally, a sense of closure ‘when the media reassert the supremacy of the established political and social order’ (167). In both events the shock of the initial devastation was rapidly followed by the
arrest of al Qaeda and Jamaah Islamiyah members, the creation and copying of the New York Times ‘Portraits of Grief’ template, and the mediation of trauma by a re-established moral order. News pundits had clearly studied the literature on bereavement and grief cycles (Kubler-Ross). However the neo-noir work culture of some outlets also fueled bitter disputes about how post-traumatic stress affected journalists themselves (Zelizer & Allan 253).

Reconfiguring the Future

After September 11 the geopolitical pundits, a reactive cycle of integration propaganda, pecking order shifts within journalism elites, strategic language, and mediated trauma all combined to bring a specific future into being. This outcome reflected the 'media-state relationship' in which coverage 'still reflected policy preferences of parts of the U.S. elite foreign-policy-making community' (Robinson 129). Although Internet media and non-elite analysts embraced Hallin’s ‘sphere of deviance’ there is no clear evidence yet that they have altered the opinions of policy-makers.

The geopolitical segue from September 11 into the U.S.-led campaign against Iraq also has disturbing implications for the ‘CNN Effect’. Robinson found that its mythic reputation was overstated and tied to issues of policy certainty that the theory’s proponents often failed to examine. Media coverage molded a ‘domestic constituency ... for policy-makers to take action in Somalia’ (Robinson 62). He found greater support in ‘anecdotal evidence’ that the United Nations Security Council’s ‘safe area’ for Iraqi Kurds was driven by Turkey’s geo-strategic fears of ‘unwanted Kurdish refugees’ (Robinson 71). Media coverage did impact upon policy-makers to create Bosnian ‘safe areas’, however, ‘the Kosovo, Rwanda, and Iraq case studies’ showed that the ‘CNN Effect’ was unlikely as a key factor ‘when policy certainty exists’ (Robinson 118). The clear implication from Robinson’s studies is that empathy framing, humanitarian values, and searing visual imagery won’t be enough to challenge policy-makers. What remains to be done?

Fortunately there are some possibilities that straddle the pragmatic, realpolitik and emancipatory approaches. Today’s activists and analysts are also aware of the dangers of ‘unfreedom’ and un-reflective dissent (Fromm). Peter Gabriel’s organisation Witness, which documents human rights abuses, is one benchmark of how to use real-time media and the video camera in an effective way. The domains of anthropology, negotiation studies, neuro-linguistics, and social psychology offer valuable lessons on techniques of non-coercive influence. The emancipatory tradition of futures studies offers a rich tradition of self-awareness exercises, institution rebuilding, and social imaging, offsets the pragmatic lure of normative scenarios. The final lesson from these books is that activists and analysts must co-adapt as the ‘War on Terror’ mutates into new and terrifying forms.

Works Cited


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