

The press garners praise for 9/11—but will it last?

Rising to the Occasion

By Katherine Guckenberger

Anyone who was near a television on the morning of September 11 was glued to it. I, for one, flipped back and forth between live network news coverage and CNN, depending on which broadcast seemed to be giving new information. Those of us in Washington, DC, were particularly alarmed to hear, shortly after the second plane hit the World Trade Center towers, that a number of commercial airliners were unaccounted for and could possibly be headed for the capital.

For the first time, Americans found themselves watching a real-time unfolding of violent events that could affect them or their loved ones. We were dependent on the news organizations to let us know what, exactly, was going on.

Before it was over, we knew September 11 would be remembered with Pearl Harbor-like infamy. Yet few of us were prepared to place the attacks in a historical context, at least not right away. In the days that followed, Americans in record numbers turned to newspapers and magazines, in addition to television broadcasts, for basic information about 9/11 and possible aftershocks. Who were the terrorists? Would they strike again?

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Widespread fear, anger, and an unsettling sense of violation and insecurity led to a craving for concrete facts, facts that were essential to our safety. Ninety-five percent of respondents to a Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health survey taken September 28-October 1 said they were following the news about the attacks, 85% of them very closely. We longed for the who, what, when, where, why, and how.

By most accounts, the press did a top-notch job of telling the American public what it needed to know, and the public, in response, lavished the press with uncharacteristically high praise. In a November 13-19 poll, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that coverage of the terrorist attacks had improved the public's image of the media for the first time in 16 years.

But what, exactly, accounted for the upswing in the public approval, and what effects, if any, would the coverage of September 11, and the subsequent war on terrorism, have on our perception of the press, and on our news habits in general?

A cynic would say that opinion had nowhere to go but up. Prior to the terrorist attacks, polls consistently showed a public disenchanted with the press, which it characterized in a 1998 survey by the American Society of Newspaper Editors as arrogant, intrusive, and overly concerned with ratings and self-aggrandizement.

"Americans have a jaundiced view of the press, and journalists are not regarded as the pros they often are," said Marvin Kalb, who had a long career in network news before becoming executive director of the Washington office of the Kennedy School of Government's Shorenstein Center. "Ever since the Vietnam War, reporters have been regarded as troublesome, problematic commodities in American life."

At the same time, the press faced a gloomy reality: as indicated by Pew Research Center survey trends, Americans were losing interest in the news. Network television was particularly hard hit. "Most people believe there won't be any network newscasts in five years," said Maxine Isaacs, former press secretary to Walter Mondale. "The six o'clock news is basically a thing of the past."

Under pressure to cut costs, and believing that the public preferred domestic stories, features, and a little dish, news organizations slashed coverage of international

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With a
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(*The New
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Times, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times*), newspapers closed foreign bureaus and relied on fewer and fewer correspondents to cover international news.

Network news coverage of international events plunged from about 2,000 minutes a year in 1988 to between 1,100 and 1,200 minutes today, according to Andrew Tyndall, author of the *Tyndall Report*, which monitors the networks' weekday evening broadcasts. In the days leading up to September 11, just 9% of an average 19-minute-long broadcast was devoted to foreign news.

But the public wasn't satisfied. In fact, it deplored what it viewed as obsessive coverage of irrelevant and gossipy stories—the Monica Lewinsky scandal, in particular, left Americans cold, with 55% in a January 1998 Gallup poll saying the news media had acted irresponsibly. Just last summer, executives and journalists found themselves in the awkward position of defending the newsworthiness of their fixation on Gary

Condit and Chandra Levy, a story that was buried in the September 11 rubble.

Journalists themselves felt unmoored and helpless, and the public remained skeptical of their motives, morality, and relevance. Before September 11, "people had a real beef with the press, or thought it wasn't speaking to their interest," said Andrew Kohut, the director of the Pew Research Center. "From the public's point of view, they would see the press covering policy fights in Washington in a very adversarial way, and they would say, 'Who needs this? It's all about

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inside baseball, and it's not about what it means to me.' 9/11, however, was 'what it means to me,' big time."

The terrorist attacks put the press back in the public's good graces. "Journalists were professional, for the most part highly accomplished, and they performed an essential role for the American people at that time," said Kalb, who described the live network television coverage in the days following the attacks as "brilliant." A Pew poll taken September 13-17 found that a whopping 89% of people rated the media's coverage of terrorism as good (33%) or excellent (56%).

They were heady days for journalists, who were deservedly proud of their performance. "I think they were reminded of why they went into that profession," said Isaacs. "They felt they knew how to do it, and they did it well." The quality of the reporting was recognized in April, when eight of the fourteen Pulitzer Prize journalism awards were given to newspapers and reporters for coverage re-

lated to September 11 and the war in Afghanistan.

Favorable impressions of the coverage—described as timely, comprehensive, and informative by respondents to Pew’s November survey—influenced public opinion in various categories. Perception of the press’s morality was up 13% from the beginning of September, professionalism was up 19%, and compassion was up 24%.

“I’d guess that a few years ago, during the Lewinsky scandal, when the public was so angry at the way the press was handling that story, you would not have gotten those kinds of ratings,” Kohut said. Endless reporting on the Lewinsky scandal eventually turned people off the news; coverage of September 11, by contrast, increased newspaper circulation and television audience numbers.

Kohut summed up reactions to the terrorism coverage in a column published in the *Columbia Journalism Review*. He wrote, “The public’s need to know trumps everything else. It not only drives public attentiveness to the news, it shapes evaluations of media performance.” Content that the public does not need or want has a negative impact on its opinion of the press.

In other words, Americans prefer the press when it focuses on hard news, when it is reporting events people deem important to them. They like it less when it reverts to analysis and punditry, and when it seems to be whipping up contention or beating a dead horse.

The Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ), a think tank affiliated with Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, released a study in January 2002 that found, among other things, that in the early days after September 11, coverage was “strikingly straightforward” and “well-documented.” The major news organiza-

tions studied by the PEJ had devoted 75% of their coverage to factual reporting. Forty-five percent of the coverage cited four or more sources, 76% of whom were named. Opinion accounted for just 9% of coverage and analysis accounted for 14%.

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Critics praised the press for not playing fast and loose with the facts, and the public gave good grades for accuracy. In the November Pew survey, 46% believed that the press usually got facts straight. Though that percentage was lower than the grades in 1985, which topped 55%, it was the best in Pew polls since 1992.

Not only was the post-September 11 coverage heavy on the facts, but it was decidedly pro-American. The bipartisan all-for-one-and-one-for-all atmosphere reflected in the coverage played well with the public. “The public often thinks that the press fuels contention in public policy debates,” said Kohut. “And there wasn’t a lot of contention in the country at that time.”

According to the PEJ study, most stories—80% in September—were all or mostly pro-American. Though 38% in November presented a “mixed” perspective, and the percentage of all or mostly pro-American stories dropped to 71%, at no point before the end of the year did the percentage that could be characterized as “dissenting” exceed 10%.

Comparing results from earlier polls with a survey conducted two months after the attacks, the Pew Center found in November that percentages of Ameri-

cans who believed news organizations protected democracy and stood up for America jumped from 46% and 43%, respectively, to 60% and 69%, all-time highs in Pew’s history of polling.

Some critics expressed concern that dissent and minority perspectives had been squelched, but in the initial phases of a crisis like September 11, the press is almost entirely dependent on the official versions of events; journalists rarely have the time, or the inclination, to entertain divergent points of view. Experts agree that patriotism is a characteristic of war coverage, and that journalists’ reaction to September 11 was completely natural.

“They’re Americans, and they react like Americans,” said Isaacs. “Nobody expects them to behave other than as human beings, as Americans, responding to dramatic events.”

The pitfall of patriotism is when it compromises the objectivity and detachment journalists need to do their jobs. “In this case, patriotism moved toward interfering, but did not quite interfere, with the functioning of good journalism,” said Kalb.

Despite its own patriotic fervor in the weeks following September 11, the public remained convinced that the press should not become a mouthpiece for the Bush administration. Fifty-two percent in the November Pew poll believed that the press should dig hard to uncover facts not released by the government, and 73% said they preferred war coverage that showed all points of view rather than coverage that was solely pro-American.

Yet if the press was enjoying a honeymoon, it was not to last for long. Throughout the fall, the percentage of Americans who rated press coverage of terrorism as excellent dropped from 48% in early October, to 32% in mid-October, to 30% in November, down from 56%

in the days following September 11, according to Pew.

Two months after the attacks, network ratings had started to slip, and the public returned to a more accustomed stance of being critical of the media. What happened? Events and access to information changed. The war shifted to Afghanistan, and the Pentagon batted down the hatches, restricting information to the public and to the press.

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Anthrax, which dominated the nightly news for two weeks in a row in October, knocked the terrorist attacks and bombing of Afghanistan out of the top slot. The story captivated Americans—an October 25-28 CBS News/*New York Times* poll found an exceptionally high proportion of the public, 94%, followed it closely—but it also scared them silly.

All three network anchors attempted to put the panic into perspective, but the damage had been done. Many people thought the press had shamelessly exploited the anthrax story—in an October 17-18 Fox News poll, 56% of respondents believed that news organizations had overhyped the coverage.

The problem, experts agreed, was that the anthrax story was immediately covered as an extension of the attack on the United States, and therefore as a part of the war on terrorism. To this day, no one knows if either of those hypotheses was accurate.

“As an institution, the press made a serious mistake,” said Isaacs. “For me, it was clear it was a domestic person. It was always clear it was a Ted Kaczynski, some loner, and by reverting to their Gary Condit mode, they threw away all the good will they had developed, and they were back into this hyper-

hysterical, meaningless, endless recycling of the same facts over and over again, because there wasn’t anything going on.”

At the same time, the Pentagon clamped down on information on the war on terrorism. Access to soldiers and to military operations was as limited as it had ever been. Even the traditionally steady flow of leaks to the press was stanchied. War-time restrictions led to more interpretation and speculation. According to the PEJ study, coverage became more analytical, and factual reporting dropped from 75 to 63% in November and December. Stories citing more than four sources dropped from 45 to 29%, and stories citing just one source grew from 20 to 25%.

Natural forces, too, conspired to tarnish the press’s good image. Time passed, fear subsided. The smoldering ruins of Ground Zero in Manhattan were hauled off to a dump on Staten Island, the bombing of Afghanistan ceased, and the public’s “need to know” succumbed to the need to get on with life.

In the early months of 2002, there was more diversity on the front pages of newspapers and at the tops of newscasts, from the collapse of Enron to the

interest following the terrorist attacks (two-thirds of those polled by Pew in November and 46% by *The Washington Post* in February said their interest had increased), the percentages of people who were following domestic news and non-terrorism foreign policy in March were just moderately higher than pre-September 11 levels.

“Normal” also means cost-conscious reporting—the commercial underpinnings of the news business cannot be ignored. Nor can what Kalb calls the “new ethos,” the emphasis on breaking stories first and, possibly, getting ahead of the facts.

It remains to be seen whether news organizations will continue to fund extensive foreign reporting in places like Afghanistan, where stories about what happened during the bombing and afterward should continue to be told. Will journalists be given the opportunity to sift through information there, or will they be called home? Are we in for less intensive, possibly less accurate, softer news?

Yes. But hardcore fans who have always followed events, and perhaps some 9/11 converts, will seek out serious news wherever they can find it, in newspapers, online, or on public radio

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Andrea Yates trial to violence in the Middle East. Partisanship returned to politics, dissent returned to the news, and people reverted to following the stories they found most appealing. Things had gone back to normal.

But what is normal? “Normal” for the American public in the post-Cold War era is a declining interest in news. Indeed, despite a professed heightening of

or TV. And as in the days before 9/11, individuals’ interests will dictate where they get their news.

“If you’re really interested in news, you’re going to be watching the NewsHour and listening to NPR,” said Kohut. “If you’re much less interested you’re going to glance at cable news when you’re surfing—or just read the headlines, if you read the newspaper at all.”