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Did the World Really Change on 9/11?

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ABSTRACT

In setting myself the question 'Did the world really change on 9/11?', I tie myself into two discussions. The first is an exercise in comparing and contrasting perceptions around the pivotal date of September 11, 2001: what was the world 'really' like prior to the attacks on America (as they came to be called) and what is it 'really' like now? The use of the word 'really' here flags the operation of value judgements; any estimation of change around this event is laden with personal perspectives. The second discussion is the one I deal with first: is there a body of opinion asserting that the events of 9/11 were world-changing events? I propose to offer four examples, centred in the US media, but exported thence to western audiences, which variously assert that the events of September 11 changed the world.

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These assertions of 'change' are often linked to anniversaries following the 9/11 atrocity. For example, the *Newsweek* online exclusive on December 12 marks the passing of the first quarter-date anniversary (three months after 9/11). It appears to frame its claim comparatively modestly: 'Living politics: How we've changed'. However, that framing is just the starting point:

> According to chaos theory... everything we do here affects the rest of the world. Not just our movies or software. The way we live our lives, the values we exhibit, the gods we worship. This is the global village McLuhan foresaw. We run the village, and have to behave as if we deserve the power and the honor. (Fineman, 2001)

Time magazine, under the banner 'A different world—how deeply have our lives been changed since September 11?', asserts: 'September 11,

2001 was one of those seismic moments, a day when the planet seemed to shudder and shift on its axis... [creating] a sense of before and after cataclysm' (Usher, 2001, p. 74). Usher goes on to draw a parallel between the turmoil in the US and evidence of reconciliation in the north of Ireland, before hoping that 'one thing won't change in this volatile world: fundamental human goodness' (p. 74).

Business Week, on February 11, 2002, felt ready to draw a parallel:

> Already that crystal-clear September morning is fast becoming an historical memory, the way some of us still remember a November day in 1963 when the gunning down of a young American President seemed to mark the end of one age and the beginning of another. ('A fragile world', p. 24)

In the immediate aftermath of the tragedy (September 13), *The Globe and Mail* online claims: 'many people [believe] the world has irreversibly changed and that they have witnessed the most shocking news event of their lives' (Mittelstaedt, 2001). In a poll, 87% said the attacks were 'the most tragic news events of their lifetimes'. On the other side of the Atlantic, a *Guardian Unlimited* special report (2001) included reference to a range of commentaries suggesting that the attacks constituted a 21st-century 'Pearl Harbour' (Brown, 2001). In combination, these sources suggest little doubt that many residents of the US consider themselves to have experienced something life-changing, with 9/11 a watershed date and the terrorist attacks on the US a watershed event. Does it necessarily follow, however, that the world has changed? Is that true for Australia, for example?

THE NON-US RESPONSE TO 9/11

Judging where we stand in relation to 9/11 turns me to the other segment of my discussion: 'What was the world "really" like prior to the attacks on America, and what is it "really" like now?'. Like almost everybody else, my experience and understanding of the world is 'mediated'. Addressing this part of the question, I ask myself what I *expect* to see in the media, and what I *hope* to see in the media. Further, how do I explain to myself what I *do* see in the media? I note here that I am not expecting academics to act as journalists, but—in a pluralistic media society—we need to be able to call journalists to account, or at least to understand why they are handling the stories of the time in the way they do.

As an academic, I'm fascinated with the idea of asking how we as Australians are responding, and why we're responding as we are. I'm aware, for example, that my perceptual filters are in place regarding 9/11. I've read articles about the fatherless children, seen pictures of the newborn babies gathered together for the photograph (and worried about the continuing intrusion of the world media into the lives of the victims), and been confronted in many different ways with the emotional implications of the 9/11 tragedy and loss. However, it's almost as if the media have decided that critical analysis of the events leading to and from 9/11 is not only un-American, but potentially anti-American.

I expect, from the studies of Gulf War coverage, to see a demonisation of 'the enemy': bin Laden, the Taliban, Al-Qaeda. I know what to expect from the media, and find it. Galvin (1994), for example, comments on events a decade ago:

> Given the sophisticated military and mass communications technology made startlingly apparent during the Gulf War... it is disturbing that some of the most important issues and events in that war went virtually unnoticed and that media distortions of historical reality occurred which would normally have been considered blatant propaganda... One would have looked in vain in most of the Western media during the crisis to have found any sense that the conflict was any more complicated than a straightforward case of a belligerent bully picking on a defenceless and innocent neighbour, and thereby deserving to be thrown out violently regardless of how many lives might be lost in the process. (pp. 184–185)

Despite these prior warnings that distorted news reporting is common in times of tension, there is little critical comment or self-reflection from the media about their coverage. I find myself anxious that, as academics, we continually have to reinvent the wheel—pointing out again that the media has constructed an enemy we can all attack in uncomplicated terms, while obscuring the nature of our nations' retaliation in terms of the human cost paid by the poor and dispossessed. Afghani civilians, for example, have already suffered extensively under Soviet occupation, the Northern Alliance, and the Taliban, and now face western-exacerbated famine and allied attacks with the insidious daisy-cutter cluster bombs.

I'm as aware as the next mass communication academic of Noelle-Neumann's (1974) 'Spiral of Silence' theory. It asserts that a minority opinion becomes increasingly hard to express as silence on that opinion

extends through time. However, there are so many different media, and so many different papers, titles, and programs, that the conformity of coverage appears to be a kind of agreement between them to refer to 9/11 in hushed tones: it is outside the experience of the everyday; its memory (as much as the distilled remembrance of the people who perished) is sacred.

Mainstream media coverage of 9/11 may demonstrate that, if truth is the first casualty of war, dissent is the first casualty of terrorism. Dissent exists, and there are a few examples, but it is stifled. Traditionally in the US, the satirical cartoonist—like a jester in the court of a medieval monarch—has a licence to go further than the courtier (or journalist). Those few brave editors who have published cartoons critical of the Bush response to 9/11, especially those that comment on the implications for domestic civil liberties and global human rights, find themselves under attack from 'the people'. Steve Benson, a syndicated cartoonist who works on the *Arizona Republic*, comments: 'There is immense pressure [from] readers and advertisers to toe the patriotic line as they define it' (Buncombe, 2002, p. 16). The cartoons are dropped, the editors apologise, and the cartoonists are themselves muzzled or self-censoring.

Far from being in a changed world, the US appears to be rediscovering a very old version of its 1950s Cold War McCarthyite self. At that time, it was un-American to have ever been a Communist (no matter that Stalin was a wartime ally), and many US artists, producers, and intellectuals were persecuted for the slightest suspicion of a connection with the radical left. Latterly, however, Americans have felt uncomfortable with the excesses of the McCarthyite witch-hunts—clearly demonstrated in their enthusiasm for the mawkish sentimentality of Hollywood's rewriting of 'Reds under the bed' history in films like *The Majestic* (2001). (Current commentators ignore the chilling reality of the 1950s House Un-American Activities Committee exemplified in Arthur Miller's (1953) satirical play *The Crucible*. But if the US can't take the truth about its criminal denial of suspects' human rights, there's no reason why the rest of the world should follow suit. American satire strikes a chord in other countries: why have we not taken up these marginalised voices and published them in Australia?

Losing the Twin Towers

Scraton (1999a), writing about other disasters, notes Williams's (1989) observation of a 'deep sense of propriety and legitimacy which has assigned both authority and responsibility to certain public sources of news and interpretation' (pp. 116–117). The dominant interpretation of the events of 9/11 associated with a sense of propriety and legitimacy includes no critical context. On the contrary, the attack on the World Trade Center's (WTC) twin towers is constructed as a barbaric arbitrary act, outside space, time, and the normal laws of causality. (Smith's (2002) definition is 'a freak event, standing outside history' (p. 192).) Such a construction has a useful side effect: it absolves the living from any responsibility to seek an understanding of the events; inexplicable evil cannot be explained.

I sense a concern that the last paragraph made mention only of the WTC. What about the other attacks? Smith (2002) writes:

> On 11 September, viewers saw people falling to their deaths from burn-ing buildings and terrified New Yorkers running to escape flying debris. So powerful were these images that they eclipsed the other terrorist attacks that day and the devastation at the crash site in Pennsylvania and the Pentagon has been very nearly forgotten; reviews of the year, printed in newspapers at the end of December 2001, focussed exclusively on the World Trade Center… it is the wreckage of 'those glittering towers', in Margaret Drabble's words, that continues to obsess both the public and the world's media. (p. 197)

The sacredness of the loss of the WTC, and its disjuncture with the fabric of daily life, is expressed symbolically in a variety of ways. To Australian audiences, for example, it was unexpected that film produc-ers would feel the need to hurriedly re-arrange the blockbuster schedule for the release of *Spider-Man*. The character could no longer be allowed to spin a web between the WTC towers: it would be unseemly, indecent, disrespectful. Similarly, the producers of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy experienced huge pressure to rename the sequel to *The Fellowship of the Ring* something other than Tolkein's title *The Two Towers*. A cultural parallel that helps explain this sensitivity is the taboo in traditional Australian Aboriginal culture that forbids the naming of dead family and community members. As with the editing out of the WTC, not-naming means remembering consciously not to name. It does not mean forget-ting.

Leaving aside the thorny, but possibly relevant, question of whether or not the terrorists who masterminded the attacks on the US expected the WTC collapse, they had certainly done their semiotic homework, targeting symbols of western capitalism—the Twin Towers; US foreign policy/defence—the Pentagon; and (possibly) US Government—the White House (if that's where the plane downed in Pennsylvania was headed, as many speculated at the time).

It's not surprising that these events attracted global media coverage. These were landmarks, icons known to us through news, films, and television. Disaster movies had schooled us to read the shocking images of attacks on these familiar places, but never prepared us for the lack of resolution that found us, days later, as an audience still expecting more. We returned again and again to the television, watching as the rescue teams toiled around the clock, expecting the drama to resume, with a happy ending for some as a counterpoint to the loss of others. Ultimately disappointing, this exposure ensured that the viewing experience was a far more searing encounter with the media than is usual—even in the case of 'as-it-happens' tragedy.

GLOBAL MEDIA EVENTS
Addressed in this way, the global media audience was not constructed as 'global', but as American. We were positioned in Australia as if we were American viewers with a very restricted range of acceptable viewing/reacting positions. Smith (2002) comments: 'in January 2002... *Time* magazine made Rudy Giuliani its person of the year; Giuliani the magazine declared was not just mayor of New York but "mayor of the world"' (p. 199). We had all been attacked, all of us led by Guiliani, none of us able to criticise the 'War on Terror'. There is some economic rationale for this construction of all audiences as-if American. News Corporation, for example, operates in Australian and US markets (as well as elsewhere), but the Australian market is 7% the size of the US one. Although morally and journalistically desirable, it would make no financial sense to Australianise coverage of 9/11 in a way that might risk alienating News Corporation's US market. In a mixed media economy (Barr, 2000, p. 61), the Australian ABC and other non-commercial media should balance this situation. As the 9/11 events happened, however, Australian viewers were confronted with a uniform response to the unfolding crisis: the national broadcaster and all commercial channels switched to the same live feed from CNN.

'Global media events' theory (GME) has developed somewhat since Dayan and Katz's (1992) book on the subject, but the events that constitute GMEs can be constructed as falling broadly into three categories: staged events, shocks, and disasters. 'Staged events' includes most of the big-ticket sporting extravaganzas—such as the (Soccer) World Cup and the Olympics—but also many rehearsed and scripted happenings, including the moon landing and royal weddings. 'Shocks' might include unexpected tragedies with rolling implications—such as the sudden deaths of world figures John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Princess Diana. 'Disasters', however, includes catastrophes affecting numbers of people living everyday lives. Although some disasters are natural, many are man-made—including accident, famine, war, and terrorism. 9/11 constitutes this kind of GME 'disaster'. So how are disasters usually covered? Is the 9/11 coverage typical?

THE MEDIA AND DISASTERS

Professor Phil Scraton (1999b) gave the 1999 Vauxhall Lecture 'Reporting Disaster' at the Centre for Journalism Studies (CJS) at Cardiff University. His major examples were UK-based and ranged from the terrorist attack on a PanAm plane over Lockerbie to the massacre of primary-school children in Dunblane and the Hillsborough Football Stadium tragedy. Commenting that journalists draw on precedent when covering disasters, he argues several points explicitly, and a final one implicitly:

- Disasters happen when least expected
- Disasters are complex events and unfold in different ways as different services carry out their different responsibilities
- First-phase is an emergency response: volatile and confused, as the situation is stabilised and assessed. Media respond as the emergency services do, at a time when consequences are still unclear and unpredictable
- Second-phase response involves crisis support and the provision of appropriate care and follow up for those affected
- Final stage (implicit) is critical reflection.

In terms of the impact of these disasters on the audience, Scraton comments: 'Schools, like football grounds, are common places, people's experiences of them commonplace... the randomness made the potential a universal'. This is also true for the office workers and aeroplane passengers on that September Tuesday morning: theirs was a universal-

ising experience for much of the developed world (but not for many inhabitants of the developing world). Notwithstanding this universalisation, Scraton argues that 'some form of detachment is important if the story told is not to be overburdened with the emotion of the moment, stripped of context and, therefore, meaning'.

In this lack of detachment, and in the repeated imaging of the collapse of the Twin Towers, it is arguable that the media are constructing less of a sound bite and more of an emotion bite. In continually presenting and re-presenting the attacks on America as beyond meaning and comprehension, is there an evident desire to keep these events in the global consciousness as if devoid of context? Scraton would counsel against such a strategy: 'It is a search for truth which exposes official discourse, returns dignity to the dead and acknowledges the experiences of the bereaved and survivors'. If the official discourse is that no retribution is too great for this unspeakable evil, then it should be exposed in a search for truth. Instead of context-free communication, suggests Scraton, powerful analysis involves 'the abandonment of simple explanations of causation in favour of a deeper grasp of context'.

TOWARDS A CONTEXT FOR 9/11

With all the column-miles of newspaper coverage of 9/11, I do not aim to offer a comprehensive 'deeper grasp of context' here. However, I have begun to look for pointers as to what might constitute contexts for the 9/11 attacks. First, I note that the US Administration's response to 9/11 is a 'War on Terror', implying that the terrorists were successful in instilling fear. A sense of fear—its nature and depth—can be investigated using five parameters:

Salience: How often do you think about it? (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979)

Likelihood: How likely do you think it is to happen? (Rogers, 1975; Rogers & Mewborn, 1976)

Severity: How awful do you think it would be if it happened? (Rogers, 1975; Rogers & Mewborn, 1976)

Imminence: How soon do you think it might happen? (Chu, 1966)

Reversibility: How easy would it be to get over? (Donovan & Henley, 1997).

Arguably, given these parameters, the negative aspects of salience, severity, and reversibility have been exacerbated by the continuous media coverage: people are likely to think about 9/11 often, to continually re-experience a sense of the awfulness of the events, and to construct the disaster as impossible to get over.

Is there an alternative way in which these events might be—or might have been—contextualised, particularly for Australian audiences? I'm going to argue that there is, comparing aspects of the disaster of 9/11 with other tragedies and disasters that have become integrated within the fabric of history and human experience. In doing this, I do not seek to minimise the horror or the pain and suffering associated with the terrorist attacks on America, but I do seek to interrogate how appropriate this trauma is as a watershed for a changed world. I also question reasons behind the lack of critical context offered by the mass media to listeners, readers, and viewers.

First, according to Smith (2002), the total of lives lost in the terrorist attacks was 3,216 (p. 194). That is a huge number, and represents unquantifiable pain and suffering, but is much less than the 10,000–50,000 dead initially feared as the Twin Towers crumbled, and has already been exceeded by civilian casualties in Afghanistan. Given that pain and suffering cannot be quantified, it is meaningless to talk about this tragedy in terms of, say, 3,216 dead being 92 times worse than 35 dead (as in Australia's Port Arthur tragedy, for example). Nonetheless, it is possible to look at this loss of life in terms of other countries, and in terms of other tragedies. Balancing the populations of Australia (19.7 million) and the US (278 million), the number of victims of the terrorist attacks in American terms would equal about 255 people in Australia. This scale of tragedy in our local context might equate to a plane accident, or half the estimated number of fatal asthma attacks each year, or somewhat less than the number of refugees drowned in 2001 attempting to find sanctuary in our country. These comparisons may seem inappropriate. After all, plane and drowning deaths are accidents; asthma attacks result from illness; the attacks on the United States were acts of deliberate harm. Returning the site of comparison to the US, can any context be given to a figure of 3,216 dead as a result of deliberate harm?

In fact, from 1979, when records were first kept, to 1999, the annual toll of gun deaths has averaged 32,000 American dead per year (Smith, 2002, p. 73), including murder, suicide, and accident. In 1999, the most current data year available, there were 28,874 gun deaths (Gun Control Network, n.d.)—the first time the figure had fallen below 30,000 since records were kept (Join Together Online, n.d.). What does that annual figure represent in terms of human loss and suffering? How many lives might have been altered or saved if the resources expended on the 'War on Terror' had been spent instead on a war on guns?

Might it be that the number of dead is less relevant than the fact that terrorist attacks represent an atrocity? Given that the history of the past century has included, for example, the terror of Hitler, Stalin, the Cultural Revolution, and the Khmer Rouge, there is no shortage of dreadful comparative atrocities. Even restricting ourselves to the decade preceding 9/11, the genocide in Rwanda claimed an estimated 800,000 lives, while 7,300 Muslim men and boys were slaughtered by Christian soldiers in Srebrenica. These are recent atrocities involving much greater numbers than the attacks on America, but they have received negligible coverage by comparison. We can conclude, therefore, that it is more than the combination of an atrocity and the number of victims that determines continuing media attention.

If western audiences had had a sense of the developing narratives of Rwanda and Srebrenica as they happened, would those horrors have figured in the media as prominently as the 9/11 attacks? Mass communication theory has identified available images and video footage as an important prerequisite for media coverage. Maybe the visible effects of the terror attacks explain more than part of their pervasive media presence? For western eyes, it was hard to see the Twin Towers collapsing and not identify with those people fleeing from their base. As television viewer Erica_c posted (10.33am) on www.beliefnet.com soon after the first attack (8.46am), 'I pray for the people who had to witness this horror firsthand' (Beliefnet, 2002, p. 9). However, if it is the presence of cameras that makes these events seem comparatively more horrific than Rwanda or Srebrenica, should the academy and the media not highlight this aspect of the 9/11 coverage in an attempt to add meaning by creating a context?

Nallia was an eyewitness on the streets of New York (10.02am): 'I was just outside. I just stood there and watched one of the buildings collapse. At least 60–70 stories just came toppling down onto the street. Thousands of people were just killed when that building fell' (Beliefnet, 2002, p. 44). Some five hours after first impact (1.40pm), she was to raise a subtly different aspect of the terror she faced: 'I stood here today in NYC and watched more lives torn apart in an instant than I thought I would ever see' (p. 44). This instantaneity would exclude comparisons with Srebrenica, and maybe with Bhopal (where a deadly spill from American chemical giant Union Carbide left thousands dead and injured), but it would invite comparisons with Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where the bombs fell on civilians as well as on military targets. How would the terrorist attacks on the US be contextualised against the use of those nuclear weapons?

If it is not the number, not the instantaneity, could it be that the ethnicity, the citizenship, and the residency of perpetrators and victims are the critical issues accounting for the War on Terror and the continuing fulmination against the 'Axis of Evil'? Smith (2002) harks back darkly to the statistic of 32,000 Americans killed each year with their own and others' guns when she says: 'An unofficial doctrine appears to be in force that says only Americans can kill Americans' (p. 176). If it were simply a matter of the perpetrators' ethnicity and citizenship, then this is a discussion that needs further airing in the media because it has moral and ethical implications. 30,000 deaths a year may be acceptable as the cost of the US Second Amendment 'right to bear arms', and 43,000 American deaths a year may be an acceptable road toll, but could these be balanced against 3,216 unacceptable deaths that might be a consequence of over a century of global economic and political supremacy (Fineman's (2001) 'power and honor' of running the global village)?

A simple matter of ethnicity and citizenship would be of concern enough, but the 'War on Terror' demonstrates that the US response is not dictated by these parameters. Most of the terrorists that suicided in the 9/11 attacks were Saudi Arabian citizens in the United States on Saudi Arabian passports; however, the cosy relationship between the US and the Saudi Arabian rulers continues, with the US selling arms and buying oil, but saying nothing about the lack of human rights and the oppression of women in the Saudi Arabian kingdom (even though these became major issues on the Taliban's record following the attacks on America). Instead, the appropriate targets identified for retaliation were

(Saudi-born) Osama bin Laden, Al-Qaeda, and the Taliban: all located in Afghanistan. Further, it remains legitimate for the media and the international community to question the true culpability of bin Laden, given that no evidence has been properly tested according to international conventions of justice and law.

US RESPONSE TO DISSENT

What can we usefully ask about the media coverage of the 9/11 tragedies, as communicators, as academics, and as media theorists? Why is our private conversation—often touching critically upon some or all of the issues raised above—so out of line with the public discourse featured in the mainstream media? As US cartoonist Steve Benson comments, 'I have editors who have pulled my syndicated cartoons because readers have marched to their offices and demanded retractions. I have had death threats, efforts to silence me, people who have compared me to traitors' (Buncombe, 2002, p. 16). The media, in general, have yet to resist the 'Spiral of Silence', speak out bravely in search of other truths, and achieve Scraton's (1999b) hoped-for 'deeper' context.

So is there an alternative response? Honor posted (2.28pm) on www.beliefnet.com: 'The US is hated... but why? What is it really? What fires passions so great to call for the deaths of thousands?' (Beliefnet, 2002, p. 48): earlier (12.18pm), Americans knew that there were people 'cheering on the streets in Palestine' (p. 33). It may be too much to ask a Government, in the heat of the 9/11 moment, to remember that this kind of negative and critical communication offers valuable information. Creative responses are possible, however. An investigation and understanding of the initial Palestinian (and developing world's) response to the collapse of the Twin Towers would do more to provide a conceptual context for the terrible attacks on America, and reduce the likelihood of equivalent atrocities in the future, than any military response. If the US were, ultimately, to respond to this terror campaign with a (kind of) 'Truth and Justice Commission', loosely modelled on the Mandela/Tutu initiative in post-Apartheid South Africa, there might be some truly open communication—and the world might really change.

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