

Journalism After September 11

Edited by Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan
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A Book Review by

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It is undeniable that everybody remembers what they were doing when the Twin Towers were demolished by two commercial airplanes during the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks (9/11) that paralyzed the U.S. and beyond. A chain of attacks that caught the world by surprise and, some might say, changed the course of history. In *Journalism After September 11*, a compendium of chapters, edited by Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan (2011), recognized academics and journalists analyzing the different roles of media before, during, and after this historical event. Among other topics, the book explores the state of American journalism at the time of the tragedy; how the media responded to the terrorist attacks and their aftermaths. Published for the first time in 2002, the second edition of the book appeared during the 10th anniversary of 9/11 with four new chapters in addition to revisions and actualizations of the original chapters.

Departing from the idea that “September 11 transformed the everyday contexts within which many journalists were operating” (Zelizer & Allan, in Zelizer & Allan, 2011: 1), as the editors put it in the introduction, *Journalism After September 11* is divided into four parts that examine the trauma of 9/11, the news and its contexts, the changing boundaries of journalism, and the possibilities of reporting trauma tomorrow. Although some chapters look at how the British media or certain pan-Arab newspapers reacted and reported on the attacks, the book is mainly focused on the American coverage of the crisis of which most of the authors are particularly critical.

In relation to the situation of American journalism prior to the terrorist attacks, the authors of the book agree in affirming that since the last decade of the 20th century American corporate media have been totally disconnected from their public and had lost their interest in international affairs. As James W. Carey puts it, “the words on everyone’s lips and pens were globalization, privatization, deregulation, innovation, the Internet and World Wide Web. As far as Americans were concerned, the 1990’s were a holiday from history” (Carey, in Zelizer & Allan, 2011: 90). In his chapter titled “American Journalism on, before, and after September 11”, Carey offers a great evaluation on the state of the American press. A press, as Jay Rosen recalls, that failed to see the anti-Americanism that was growing in certain parts of the world. And a

failure that included “the White House, the State Department, the FBI, the CIA, the Pentagon and most of the US foreign policy establishment” (Rosen, in Zelizer & Allan, 2011: 39).

The book’s contributors analyze in detail the coverage of the attacks by the American press. An unusual coverage marked by a strong sense of patriotism and where the journalists established, in Michael Schudson words, “a human connection to their community” (Schudson, in Zelizer & Allan, 2011: 47) and “a prose of solidarity rather than a prose of information” (Ibid: 49). This patriotism in addition to the aforementioned disconnection from global politics led, according to Robert W. McChesney, to a total support by the press of the Bush administration’s “war on terror”. In relation to the visual coverage of the tragedy, Barbie Zelizer’s chapter on how the events of 9/11 and the public trauma were represented by photojournalists is especially intriguing. Zelizer establishes a connection between the way in which the terrorist attacks were represented and the manner in which the American liberation of the prison camps during the World War II was depicted. In both cases, she explains, photographs tended to show people in “varying witnessing practices” (Zelizer, in Zelizer & Allan, 2011: 60) instead of displaying direct images of the horror.

Journalism After September 11 also investigates the differences of reporting between different media. Despite of the fact that the common trend in American media was towards a journalism of patriotism and community, television, newspapers, newsmagazines, and the Internet fulfilled different necessities. For example, Stuart Allan explains that the Internet became a place for alternative views and recounts: “In stretching the boundaries of what counted as journalism, ‘amateur newsies’ and their bloggers together threw into sharp relief the reportorial conventions of mainstream journalism” (Allan, in Zelizer & Allan, 2011: 178). The Internet permitted those American citizens critical of the American media coverage and the unified discourse of the majority of the news to engage with citizens from other countries in debates about 9/11 and the international media coverage of the tragedy.

Although not very extensive, there is a space in *Journalism After September 11* for the examination of how the coverage of the terrorist attacks affected the global image of the Muslim community and Muslims’ lives around the planet. As Karim H. Karim notes, “[m]ost Northern journalists covering Muslim societies are largely unfamiliar not only with the subtleties of the contemporary religious debates but also with the primary beliefs and practices of their members” (Karim, in Zelizer & Allan, 2011: 142). In the aftermaths of 9/11, this contributed to continuous stereotypes in the news that negatively affected the daily lives of Muslims.

Journalism After September 11 is a worthwhile reading book dealing with many issues that have arisen in the short and long term of the media coverage. Despite being focused on the American and British media, the book is rigorous and broad in the treatment of topics, and it constitutes a great intellectual effort towards the analysis of how journalism responded to the tragedy and the consequences of this response.

About the Reviewer

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