

DANNY
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since the day
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BY DANNY SCHECHTER

New York, September 11, 2003

THIS IS A TIME FOR REMEMBRANCE AND REFLECTION. IT is also a time for media people to assess the role we have played since two planes smashed into the Twin Towers two years ago this week – smashing with them some of the illusions that drove the media system in the era historians may yet call “B-9-11.”

September 11 was the day that is said to have “changed everything.” But did it change the media that played a central part in the drama of that day? I was sitting at this same computer on that morning, writing about the U.S. walkout at the racism conference in South Africa a day earlier, and preparing to note the anniversary of the brutal September 11th 1973 overthrow of Chile’s President Salvatore Allende.

And then, a colleague stuck a radio in my ear. There was trouble brewing a few miles south of our Times Square offices. As I listened to breaking news breaking everywhere, I started writing these words in what has become a daily Weblog born on that tragic occasion – September 11, 2001:

“Here we are in the morning in New York listening to reports of planes crashing into the World Trade Center, as if they were coming from Edward R. Murrow during the blitz in London. Unconfirmed reports. And then rumors. And then, more alarming information. First one plane. An accident? Then another. Not an accident. A tower collapses. Then another. The Pentagon is hit.

“The BIG MEDIA is in action with graphics, music and a drumbeat of urgency. It is, of course, wall-to-wall coverage, with each outlet featuring its own ‘exclusive coverage’ of the same scene – that jet plane tearing through the World Trade Center. And when we weren’t seeing that horrendous image being recycled endlessly, used as what we in the TV business used to call ‘wall paper’ or B-roll, other equally compelling images were on the screen: the Pentagon on fire, smoke coming out of the buildings, buildings collapsing, people jumping from high floors, and panic in the streets.

“And then the parade of ‘expert’ interviews begin, featuring virtually the same group of former government officials and terrorism specialists on each show. . . . You can imagine the booking agents all working overtime from the same Rolodex, shuttling these pundits-for-all-seasons, from studio to studio, from CNN to Jim Lehrer’s News Hour, to CBS and back again.

“It was only back on PBS, in one of Jim Lehrer’s interminable ‘snooze hour’ belt-way blather sessions that one got an inkling of what the Bush Administration may actually be planning to do, once the final fatality count sinks in, and the sadness of the funerals and mourning begin. Then, as everyone knows, Americans will go from shock to outrage. One of Lehrer’s mostly conservative experts, Bill Kristol of Rupert Murdoch’s Weekly Standard, passed on an official high-level leak. Namely, that the US will link Bin Laden to Iraq’s Saddam Hussein.”

PROFESSIONALISM UNDER FIRE

READING ALL THIS NOW, TWO YEARS ON, I WOULDN’T CHANGE MUCH. I was pleased to be reminded that I paid attention to the Iraq connection that many

missed. But none of us at the time were ready for what was to come. 9/11 shot a massive dose of adrenaline through our newsrooms. It brought out the best in us – bravery, honesty, and the sight of highly competitive journalists cooperating with each other, sharing footage, working like demons to get the word out. It was an awesome display of professionalism under fire – literally.

The coverage that day celebrated the people who died in those towers and the working class men and women who responded and in many instances gave their lives while doing so. Journalists were humbled by the surprise and scale of what happened. Suddenly, all the junk news that was TV fodder in the month before 9/11 mattered little: The shark attacks, the Gary Condit sex scandal, and even Monica Lewinsky was quickly junked to make way for a dangerously new reality.

In the immediate aftermath, there was some real digging into how this could happen, and a variety of attempts to gauge the hostility to American foreign policy in much of the world with probing reports and magazine pieces about “why they hate us.” Many media outlets counseled against vengeance against innocent Muslims.

Many of the Americans who flocked to the media that week sought out new sources. There was a surge in traffic to overseas news sites, such as Arab News, Asia Times Online and the Guardian, and global broadcasters like BBC and CBC. Non-Western broadcasters like Al Jazeera and Abu Dhabi TV were being taken seriously for the first time. Many of us demanded more diverse perspectives, context and background. And we found it by circumnavigating dominant media outlets in favor of news organizations based in once obscure locales, such as Quetta, Qatar and Kandahar. The news outlets soon followed our lead, parachuting brave journalists into remote regions of the world to “lift the veil” on terrorism.

'RESPECTING' AUTHORITY

BUT THIS INTROSPECTION WAS SHORT LIVED. THE UNMISTAKABLE odor of “patriotic correctness” turned news organizations red, white and blue. Soon

there would be flags flying in the graphics and in the sets and lapels of anchor people. As the government moved to war mode, most of the media returned their focus to Washington, marching in step in a stunning display of conformity and deference. Australian-born media tycoon Rupert Murdoch showed his true American patriotism by declaring that it was important that the world learned to “respect” America’s war in Iraq. Mr. Murdoch gave several interviews in the run up to the attack on Iraq expounding his pro-war beliefs. All of his newspapers backed the war, and his newscasts pumped their coverage full with patriotic music and computer animation.

Few questions were raised about the government’s (and the media’s) failure to respond to previous threats and official predictions of imminent terrorist attacks. These concerns were quickly sidelined by discussions of public complacency and/or naiveté about the world. How the U.S. intelligence apparatus could have missed the attack was taken only as evidence that it needed more money, not a different policy to serve.

No one delved deeply into the media’s decision to cut international news coverage from their daily papers and nightly broadcasts. The media trotted out its usual excuse: “we give the public what they want. And they don’t want stories about the rest of the world.”

Missing in the mainstream media’s coverage of all of this – and still mostly missing two years later – is a real discussion of possible motives of the alleged terrorists. Why would they do it? Why now? What was their political agenda? How did it tie into U.S. economic interests and geo-political alignments? There was certainly no mention of the fact that State terrorism by countries like the U.S. and Israel often trigger counter terrorism by guerilla forces.

A study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, examining news coverage in the months after 9-11, found that solid sourcing and factualness dominated the coverage of the attacks in the weeks after 9-11. But as the story moved to the war in Afghanistan, analysis and opinion swelled – so much so that the level of fact sourc-

ing declined to levels lower than those seen in the middle of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal.

After the Taliban fell, news producers returned to a studio-based, talk-show format, populated by western “experts” who ruminated over the White House view on the war. There was virtually no international angle offered except a few snatches of file footage of Osama Bin Laden fondling an AK 47, with the word “Exclusive” stamped on it. Bin Laden looked like a cartoon figure.

In the newsrooms, even prominent anchors were intimidated by conservative watchdog groups and a White House spin operation that blanketed the outlets. Almost nine months later, Dan Rather – the CBS news anchor who in the immediate aftermath of September 11 wrapped himself in the flag, telling late night CBS program host David Letterman that he was waiting for the President to tell him what to do next – was more reflective about the tension between jingoism and journalism that played out in the media and inside the souls of many viewers.

To the surprise of those who saw him as a voice of the Establishment, Rather, speaking out on the BBC, not his own network, blasted media coverage including his own role as one of America’s best-known TV newscasters. “It is an obscene comparison – you know, I am not sure I like it – but you know there was a time in South Africa that people would put flaming tires around people’s necks if they dissented. And in some ways the fear is that you will be ‘necklaced’ here, you will have a flaming tire of lack of patriotism put around your neck,” he said.

“Now it is that fear that keeps journalists from asking the toughest of the tough questions.”

FEAR BEFORE FACTS

THIS FEAR IN THE NEWSROOMS, ESPECIALLY AFTER THOSE STILL unsolved anthrax attacks targeted media outlets, mirrored and enflamed fear in the heartland of America. News about terror often became distancing and frightening with alarmist reporting of an often unsubstantiated, if not, misleading kind, leading

to a panicked response in which millions of Americans said that they were ready to sacrifice their basic freedoms for security. In many instances, “breaking news bulletins” forecasting new attacks proved wrong, based on skimpy evidence or none at all.

Millions of people ended up relying on such reports, often believing they were being well served by them. Quickly, our minds and attention spans were tethered to a flow of bulletins, headlines and buzzwords floating cryptically as text at the bottom of their TV screen, endlessly presenting a parade of headlines about wars and deaths and celebrity divorces. All of these items were treated with the same sense of urgency as if they are all the same.

And then came the wars. In Afghanistan, more journalists died in the early days than soldiers. The Pentagon tried to operate in secrecy, limiting information and access. When protests mounted and coverage turned critical, there was a policy shift. Successful experiments were conducted in embedding reporters, getting them to bond with service members. When that worked well, it was expanded and later helped ensure a fawning and cheerleading posture by most mainstream media outlets throughout the world. (For chapter and verse, see my new book “Embedded: Weapons of Mass Deception” available through mediachannel.org).

Now as media coverage becomes more critical as U.S. Iraq policy unravels and a pricey “war on terror” soldiers on with no end in sight, an un-brave media system may be changing its tune. Yet, even as newly critical questions start being raised about government duplicity and deception on issues like the WMDs and Saddam’s threat to U.S. security, the questions could be turned on the media, too. Why wasn’t the public told all of this before the war? is one that suggests itself.

PUBLIC BACKLASH

WHEN – IN AN UNPRECEDENTED DISPLAY OF HOSTILITY AGAINST BIG media – more than a million Americans spoke out against a FCC rule change that would benefit conglomerate owners of news outlets, the media began to take note.

A groundswell of dissent against media ownership became indicative of a broad shift in American attitudes toward those who control what we watch, read and listen to. What was once a casual complaint about coverage of the news has transformed into an issue around which Americans from every stripe were organizing. Media no longer just objectively reports the news of the world. They have become news. And the story isn't altogether good.

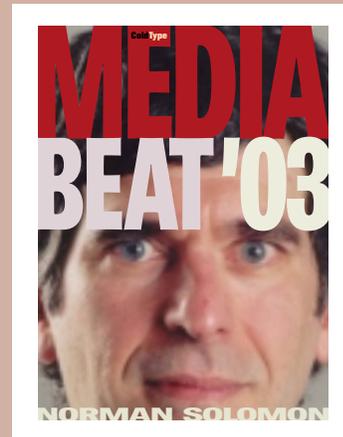
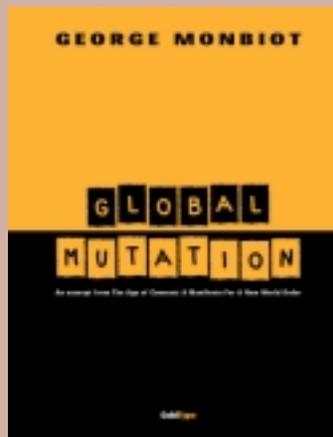
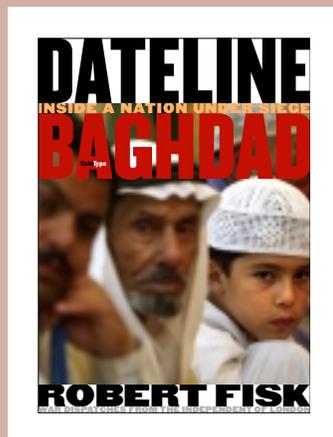
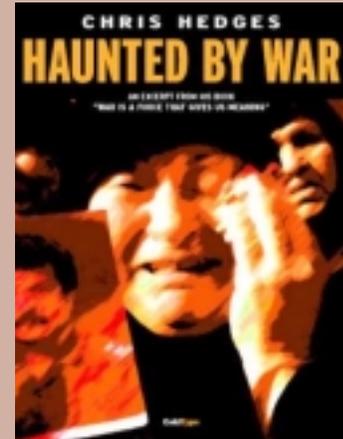
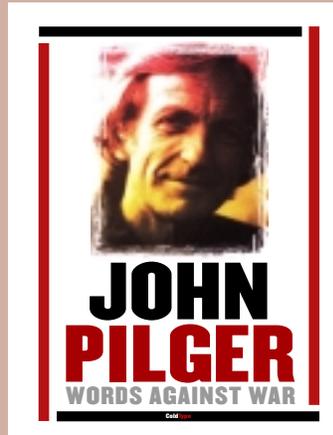
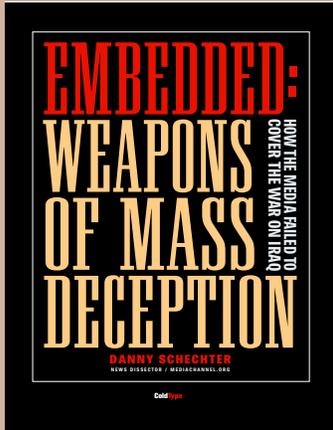
With the consolidation of more media outlets under fewer and fewer owners, the organizations that present the news have become less transparent. Their owners' rise to prominence in business is paralleled by their increased influence over the political process. Media that once served as the fourth estate – keeping in check the powers of government and large corporations – are today bedfellows to this same elite.

This cronyism came to the fore most clearly after 9-11 as big media formed a line behind an Administration eager to bolster its tenuous case for a war in Iraq. Washington returned the favor in June by bowing to Big Media interests in the FCC's as yet unsuccessful attempt to deregulate the industry.

After Gulf War I, Rather condemned most TV news for playing the role of lap dog, rather than watchdog. What will he say about all the wagging the dog that went on in this one? When we look back, we may discover that what did change for the media after 9/11 was the public's respect for it. n

News Dissector Danny Schechter writes a daily column for Mediachannel.org. He has written a book on post 9/11 coverage, "Media Wars: News At a Time of Terror" (Rowman & Littlefield).

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