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# The Competing Narratives of 9/11

BY ASHLEY JOHNSON  
AND VINCENT TAS



If you think about the way in which people get their news, it is so often in fragments of disconnected images and headlines. The story is too easily summed up by the front page of the newspaper. The cover of the newspaper is the beginning of a narrative that is infiltrated in culture. The way in which the story is framed generates history. For this analysis, we were particularly interested in the way that September 11<sup>th</sup> was framed across the world. The objective is to analyze the way in which the events of 9/11 were covered by the U.S. and overseas press. What is the reaction of American, European, and Middle East newspapers to the events that took place on September 11, 2001? Is there a pattern in the articles, a common language they use? Is the story of September 11<sup>th</sup> the same in America as it is in the rest of the world? What generalizations can be made about all media coverage across the world? Are international papers more or less “objective” when analyzing September 11<sup>th</sup> than American national papers? If the international papers have a different story about what happened on September 11<sup>th</sup>, does this mean the media are giving state propaganda? If we could find some differences

between the ways that American newspapers discussed what happened on September 11<sup>th</sup> versus what international papers say, we could begin to understand to what extent propaganda exists in our society. There are three main parts analyzed in the national and international papers: the front page images, the headlines, and the story.

### The Front Page of the American and International Press

Once you start to look, you'll see how difficult it is to find the actual front pages of international newspapers. While it is easier to find the text of newspapers online; it is more difficult to recover actual newspapers. This makes it challenging to actually see how the story is framed visually during that moment in history. However, because September 11<sup>th</sup> is such an important date, sources are more easily obtainable. Part of the problem with our media system is that visual perspectives outside the American mainstream media are hard to find. Fortunately, the internet allows us to see more of the images that were missing from the American perspective of the coverage. In analyzing the front cover of newspapers, there were several websites used such as [www.poynterextra.org](http://www.poynterextra.org), [www.newseum.org](http://www.newseum.org), and [www.september11news.com](http://www.september11news.com). These websites collected the front pages of newspapers from the day of or the day after September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. Another very useful source was the archive of *DeStandaard*, the most respected newspaper of Belgium. They have a collection of newspaper articles published in the days after 9/11. Interestingly, there is a collection of (translated) reactions of the biggest newspapers around the world on 9/12: <http://www.standaard.be/archief/dossiers/index.asp?dosID=422>. Other sources include <http://www.onlinenewspapers.com>, a start page to look for papers all over the world, and [www.worldpress.org](http://www.worldpress.org), very useful certainly for the translated articles out of the Middle East.

### IMAGERY

The images of September 11<sup>th</sup> are burned into the collective memory of the American public. That moment in which the planes hit the World Trade Center is difficult to forget because it was repeated over and over again in the media. Part of the problem with this is that the images often cover up the explanation behind the event. Imagine, for example, that photography or video did not exist. Would we better understand why September 11<sup>th</sup> happened? Neal Postman, author of *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, explains how the “graphic revolution,” “the new imagery, with photography at its forefront, did not merely function as a supplement to language, but bid to replace it as our dominant means for construing, understanding, and testing reality.” Photography lacks syntax, depriving the ability to argue with the world. Thus, in a sense, “photography is preeminently a world of fact,” while language is the “medium we use to challenge, dispute, and cross-examine what comes into view, what is on the surface.” The use of photography during September 11<sup>th</sup> further dramatized the event, downplaying the larger questions of why it happened.

There are a few general observations that can be made about the similarities and differences between the images found in national papers versus those found in international papers. In general, the front page images found in the American newspapers



on the day of or after the attack were based on the single image of the two World Trade Center Buildings being attacked. Instead of showing a variety of viewpoints, most of the American front pages had a picture of the attack when the towers were still standing, as if you are in New York watching the event as it was happening. By counting the 405 national newspapers on the [www.september11news.com](http://www.september11news.com) site, 57% of the main photographs found on the front page of American newspapers are close up shots of the World Trade Center still standing either at the moment of impact or soon after, when it is burning. When you compare this to the major International Papers, the images are slightly different. Of the 255 International newspapers, only 58 or 38% showed close up pictures of the towers standing. One possible explanation for this could be that many of the International papers did not use the same “moment of impact” photos because of the time difference. Another explanation is that the international papers framed the story differently than the national press. Perhaps this shows to what extent the American press was in shock, while the international press was already concerned with showing the aftermath of the destruction. Another difference between the American images and the international images is that the latter showed more humans in distress. According to Axel Moser and Michel Millar, author of “Press Coverage of 9/11 and its Aftermath,” “none of the US newspapers had photos of bodies falling from the towers, but O Dia (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), for instance, showed a picture of a victim falling to his death.”

Another visual aspect that is quite interesting of both national and international front pages is that neither showed many pictures of the Pentagon being attacked. On the front cover all that was emphasized was the World Trade Center attack. It is as if the collective memory of the Pentagon attack did not happen because the media didn't show pictures of it until at least the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> page (if that). In this sense, seeing has become the basis of believing. There are several conspiracy theories surrounding whether or not the Pentagon actually was hit by a Boeing 757. Several different on-line

sources hint that the Pentagon was actually hit by a cruise missile and the initial hole of the attack was too small to have been made by a Boeing 757. These discrepancies could explain why the media did not emphasize the story or show pictures on the front cover. The availability of photographs can often determine what the media decides to focus on. According to Bennett, author of “News Content: Four Information Biases that Matter”, “there is often a tension between not reporting important stories that are hard to picture.” Perhaps part of the reason that the Pentagon attack was not a larger story was not only that it was a less of a human loss, but there weren’t the same kind of dramatic visual images available to the media.

## HEADLINES

Immediately, the name “9/11” was written into history with the headlines of the mass media. According to Joe Marren, “headlines are as much a design element as a front door to the news.” One word headlines were used in 63 of the 405 American papers. The most popular term used was “TERROR” or “ATTACK” in American newspapers. A popular headline phrase in international papers was “APOCALYPSE”. These headlines are enticing, yet give little insight as to why the incident happened. They grab the reader’s attention similar to that of an advertisement so that you are motivated to read more. Fragmentation of information emphasizes “individual actors over the political contexts in which they operate” and “is heightened by the use of dramatic formats that turn events into self-contained, isolated happenings.” The headlines are fragmented in a way that isolate September 11<sup>th</sup> as something disconnected from the history of terrorism and foreign policy. Imagine if the newspapers used the one word headline of “PAYBACK” rather than “UNTHINKABLE” (which was frequently used); how different would the event be framed in our collective memory. Again and again, the headlines of newspapers showed shock and drama rather than explanation.

## American News Stories

There is a general theme in the narrative of major American newspapers on September 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>, 2001. The articles depicted a country in shock, yet lacked an explanation for motives behind the events. Here is an analysis of the major news articles on the front page or as opt-ad editorials immediately following the events that



took place on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. What is important about these stories is that they are likely the most widely read articles about the attacks because of their timing. As result, these are the articles that shape the narrative around the event, significantly make history.

## LOS ANGELES TIMES

The *Los Angeles Times* op-ed editorial printed on September 13, 2001 frames America as a country of freedom and tolerance. It glorifies New York as a place where people have come for centuries to have a better life. The *LAT* portrays the USA in a way that makes it difficult to understand why anyone would want to attack such a country. Such an article should have been written on a day in which there was no attack, for ironically, they fail to ask the question of why anyone would want to harm it. The *LAT* ends the article by saying that there will be consequences. The article lacks an in-depth analysis of the larger questions surrounding U.S. foreign policy.

## THE NEW YORK TIMES

### New York Times

#### *Nation Plunges Into Fight With Enemy Hard to Identify*

By R. W. Apple Jr. Washington, Sept. 11

...But Mr. Bush alone must decide how to retaliate and against whom, and he will be operating in a murky area.

Some strategists suggested that Mr. Bush might mount a ground attack on bin Laden’s headquarters, which are believed to be somewhere in Afghanistan, much as Woodrow Wilson sent American troops into Mexico before World War I to capture Pancho Villa dead or alive.

If the United States develops solid evidence that any country aided the perpetrators of today’s attacks, said Richard C. Holbrooke, ambassador to the United Nations under the Clinton administration, a declaration of war against that country might be appropriate and retaliation against it should certainly be undertaken in short order...

*The New York Times* article questions how to retaliate against the terrorists, not what can be done to stop further violence. They suggest striking back with light and deadly weapons to destroy the terrorist camps. The article mentions cruise missiles as being efficient. According to the article, America has to make clear to its allies that terrorism is a global threat. The whole focus of the article is on retaliation. The *NYT* even asks “why the date 9/11” but nowhere do they ask, “what could have been the motivation of the hijackers” (a more important question).

### The New York Times

#### *Hijacked Jets Destroy Twin Towers and Hit Pentagon*

By Serge Schemann



...President Bush, facing his first major crisis in office, vowed that the United States would hunt down and punish those responsible for the "evil, despicable acts of terror" which, he said, took thousands of American lives. He said the United States would make no distinction between those who carried out the hijackings and those who harbored and supported them. Apart from the major question of who was responsible, a host of other questions were certain to be at the forefront in coming days and weeks. One was the timing -- why Sept. 11?...

The *New York Times* article found on September 12, 2001 is interesting from the standpoint that it analyzes who attacked and why on the date of "September 11<sup>th</sup>", yet it does not shed light on what the political motives were.

### USA TODAY

The main story on USA Today predicts: "When the mourning ends, the tears will turn swiftly to anger, and how that anger is managed may define..." (9/12). There will be more attacks, predicts the newspaper. The solution this paper gives for the attack that happened the day before is to search those responsible and eliminate them. Not only the terrorists, but also their hosts and those that supported them financially should be eradicated. The *USA Today* raises questions such as: why could our US intelligence not avoid or predict such an attack or why was our flight system so vulnerable? But the *USA Today* does not ask what the reasons were for the attack!

### THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The *Wall Street Journal* uses the analogy of World War II to explain what the reaction should be for the attacks saying, "...the east coast carnage was the fruit of the Clinton administration's Munich-like appeasement of the Palestinians". The *WSJ* says that history repeats itself and we must learn from Chamberlain and Munich. The *Wall Street Journal* implies that democracies have become soft. Freedom created prosperity and by this we thought we could resolve all conflicts with money. The *WSJ* blames the policy of Clinton in the Middle East. We are now paying the price for the policy of Clinton. The *WSJ* also uses the term "evil" frequently. They see the attacks as a form of evil (rather than looking behind the result of US foreign policy).

### THE WASHINGTON POST

***Terrorists Hijack 4 Airliners, Destroy World Trade Center, Hit Pentagon; Hundreds Dead, Bush Promises Retribution; Military Put on Highest Alert***

By Michael Grunwald

Washington Post Staff Writer

Wednesday, September 12, 2001; Page A01

In a grim address to the nation last night, President Bush denounced the attacks as a failed attempt to frighten the United States, and promised to hunt down those responsible. "We will make no distinction," he said, "between the

terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them."

But amid all the sadness and all the outrage, there were questions about lax security and inadequate intelligence, as Americans tried to fathom how such a catastrophe could happen with no apparent warning. America's battle against terrorism, it seemed clear last night, will never be the same.

Many members of both parties declared that for all practical purposes, the nation is at war. At a briefing last night in the battered Pentagon, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld warned that America's enemies should not rest easy.

In his speech last night, Bush emphasized the nation's harmony, noting that "a great people have been moved to defend a great nation. After reading from the 23rd Psalm, he proclaimed that even amid suffering and death, Americans will remain committed to their freedom-loving way of life. ...America has stood down enemies before, and we will do so this time."

The country must prepare to fight the first war of the new century. As most American newspapers, the *Washington Post* talks of vengeance. They mention Osama Bin Laden as a prime suspect, but why is this? Again, similar to the other newspapers, the *Washington Post* does not ask themselves what could have been the motives.

### THE AMERICAN RESPONSE

In all of these articles, there was little talk of 'violence breeds violence' or that a massive retaliation may only invite more of the same. The only critical edge to the coverage involved raising the question about why so many official predictions about imminent terrorist threats went unreported for so long. These concerns were raised, but quickly sidelined by discussions of national complacency and/or naïveté about the world. How the U.S. intelligence apparatus could have missed this was taken only as evidence that it needs more money, not a different policy. No mention was made of the cutbacks in international news coverage that keeps so many Americans so out of touch with global events.

Missing was any discussion of possible motives by the alleged terrorists, such as why would they do this and why now? What was their political agenda? There was no mention of September 11th as the anniversary of the failed Camp David accords. There was certainly no mention of the fact that state terrorism by countries, whether they are the U.S., Russia, Iraq, Afghanistan or Israel, often triggers or hardens counterterrorism by guerrilla forces. There was virtually no international angle offered in most of the coverage except a few snatches of file footage of Osama Bin Laden fondling an AK47. Bin Laden looked like a cartoon figure (like Ali Baba in cartoons). It seemed that most newspapers were cautious about attributing this to him, perhaps because of early blame to Arabs of the Oklahoma City bombing, which turned out to be the work of an American.

## European News Articles

### FRANCE

The French newspaper, *Le Monde* is typically critical of the United States Government. Yet on September 12, 2001 it ran a front-page headline reading "*Nous Sommes Tous Américains*", or "We are all Americans" *Nous sommes tous Américains, nous sommes tous New Yorkais*. *Le Monde* makes the comparison with John Kennedy in 1962 in Berlin who said "we are all Berliners." *Le Monde* has also on its front page a drawing of "suspect numero un" (suspect number one): Oussama Ben Laden. Colombani says that:

Perhaps, even in Europe, from the Gulf War to the use of F-16s by the Israeli army against the Palestinians, we have underestimated the intensity of the hate, which, from the outskirts of Jakarta to those of Durban, among the rejoicing crowds in Nablus and Cairo, is focused against the United States.

*Le monde* seems to see the irony in condemning Bin Laden:

If Bin Laden, as the American authorities seem to think, really is the one who ordered the Sept. 11 attacks, how can we fail to recall that he was in fact trained by the CIA and that he was an element of a policy, directed against the Soviets, that the Americans considered to be wise? Might it not then have been America itself that created this demon?

Another French newspaper, *Le Figaro*, uses the same argument in an article on the front page: *La CIA a fabriqué un monster* (Patrick de SAINT-EXUPERY) , or "The CIA has created a monster." Also, *Le Figaro* speaks about "La Nouvelle Guerre" (the new War) sees this not only as an attack on America but as an attack on the whole West. Just as *Le Monde* (nous sommes tous Américains), *Le Figaro* speaks in terms of "we", saying "we are attacked" or "L'Europe fait cause commune avec l'Amérique" (Pierre BOCEV, Philippe GELIE, *Le Figaro* 12 September). One difference with the American newspapers is that *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* seem to ask why this happened. They both blame the policy of the West towards the rest of the world.

### GREAT BRITAIN

*The Guardian*, a "leftist" newspaper of Great Britain, shares a similar view as the French newspapers in its front page article: *They can't see why they are hated*. The article implies that Americans cannot ignore what their government does abroad. Milne writes in a pessimistic article:

Nearly two days after the horrific suicide attacks on civilian workers in New York and Washington, it has become painfully clear that most Americans simply don't get it. From the president to passersby on the streets, the message seems to be the same: this is an inexplicable assault on freedom and democracy,

which must be answered with overwhelming force - just as soon as someone can construct a credible account of who was actually responsible. Shock, rage and grief there has been aplenty. But any glimmer of recognition of why people might have been driven to carry out such atrocities, sacrificing their own lives in the process - or why the United States is hated with such bitterness, not only in Arab and Muslim countries, but across the developing world - seems almost entirely absent.

Just as the French newspapers, *The Guardian* sees the irony in the history if Bin Laden is really behind the attacks:

If it turns out that Tuesday's attacks were the work of Osama bin Laden's supporters, the sense that the Americans are once again reaping a dragons' teeth harvest they themselves sowed will be overwhelming. It was the Americans, after all, who poured resources into the 1980s war against the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul, at a time when girls could go to school and women to work. Bin Laden and his mojahedin were armed and trained by the CIA and MI6, as Afghanistan was turned into a wasteland and its communist leader Najibullah left hanging from a Kabul lamp post with his genitals stuffed in his mouth. But by then Bin Laden had turned against his American sponsors, while US-sponsored Pakistani intelligence had spawned the grotesque Taliban now protecting him. To punish its wayward Afghan offspring, the US subsequently forced through a sanctions regime which has helped push millions to the brink of starvation, according to the latest UN figures, while Afghan refugees fan out across the world.

Another big English newspaper, *The Independent*, vows the same concerns as *The Guardian*. The article titled, "Doomsday," is particularly concerned by the language president Bush uses immediately after 9/11, saying, "This will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil. But good will prevail," the president said. He said the United States was prepared to spend "whatever it takes."

Terrorists will really win if the civilized world forgets their civilized values and uses unnecessary violence. The Americans also have to investigate how to take away the sources of terrorism, because as *The Independent* recalls, the IRA attacks could not have been stopped by better security; conflicts can only be resolved by taking away the sources of the conflict. *The Financial Times* says that (in the article "Assault on America") the US witnessed on 9/11 their own vulnerability. According to the article, Bush should review his policy on the Middle East. There is no direct link between what happened Tuesday and the militant Palestinians, but the attitude of Bush toward Ariel Sharon's hard policy means a source of anger among extremists in the whole region.

## GERMANY

A similar argument can be found in the *Die Frankfurter Allgemeine*, a German conservative newspaper. In the article, “*Terroranschläge auf Amerika*” or “Terror Attack in America” the *DFA* says that the attacks showed the vulnerability of the US for terrorism. It is not at all sure that Islam terrorists are behind the attacks. The US has a lot of enemies who feel threatened by their economic and cultural power. Commentator Wolfgang Günter Lerch likewise stresses the importance of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

## SPAIN

Just as most European newspapers, *El País*, (liberal) shows its solidarity in this September 12, 2001 article:

...Spain has shown its full solidarity. It also suffers the scourge of terrorism, one that does have a name: ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna), the Basque separatist organization. Iraq did not join in the expressions of rejection and horror at what has happened, while Afghanistan claims it had nothing to do with the attack.

In comparison to British and Irish newspapers, is clear that *El País* sees this attack in a different perspective than most European newspapers. But also El País has its critics:

These signs of international solidarity ought to lead the United States to return to multilateralism and to stop acting, as it has done on too many occasions, as a lone ranger. The situation created by the atrocious attack has once more highlighted the need for an international justice system, with the creation of the International Criminal Court, which the United States has so far rejected... The punishment should not turn into a crusade that spills over beyond the fight against terrorism..

## THE EUROPEAN RESPONSE

In general, the European publications rushed to express their grief and solidarity with the United States following the news of the September 2001 terrorist attacks. “Nous sommes tous Américains” “We Are All Americans,” Paris' liberal *Le Monde* uncharacteristically proclaimed in its top headline on Sept. 12, 2001. And though the headline sparked controversy in France, *Le Monde* was in good company. Similar articles appeared in European newspapers from across the political spectrum. As the initial shock of the disaster gave way to grief, fear for the future crept into the commentary from the European press.

## Middle East News Articles

## AFGHANISTAN

The Middle East press reacted differently regarding the 9/11 attacks. We found an Afghan newspaper that appeared on 9/12/01. One of them was the *The Afghan News Network*. Its front page title was “Taliban Condemn Attacks in U.S.” and stated:

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) - Afghanistan's hardline Taliban rulers condemned the devastating terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on Tuesday and rejected suggestions that Osama bin Laden could be behind them.(...) "Such a big conspiracy, to have infiltrated in such a major way is impossible for Osama," Muttmain told The Associated Press in a telephone interview. He said bin Laden does not have the facilities to orchestrate such a major assault within the United States.

## JORDAN

The Arab papers were very blunt by blaming the attack on the result of U.S.'s foreign policies throughout the years. An example is an article from *The Jordan Times*, titled “For the arrogance of power America now pays a terrible price,” which states,

The American nation appears not only immensely distressed and angry about the bombings but surprised too. It cannot understand why anyone should be moved by such hatred against it and, inured from the rest of us by the isolationism of most of its political representatives and its media, it has little idea of the currents swirling against it.

*The Jordan Times* says that they are quite sure that the situation in Palestine caused the attacks in America. A lack of surprise that this happened was common in many Arab newspapers.

## SAUDI ARABIA

Another Arab newspaper, *Al-Hayat*, used proud language in explaining how some “maniacs” could achieve such an attack with just knives:

“The incident of Terrible Tuesday came as a horrific strike to U.S. arrogance, especially when it proved to everyone that a few guns or knives held by some 10 to 20 maniacs could do that amount of harm and destroy the greatest army and security machinery on earth.” The logical deduction should question why the United States in particular? Why its people? What is the main concealed Israeli secret behind it?

## EGYPT

Most Arab newspapers focus on the fact that America could be hit so “easily.” Also, the fact that they say the attacks “destroyed the greatest army in the world” points in that direction. The same kind of language is used in the Egyptian newspaper, *Samir Ragab, Al-Gumburiya*:

American pride would be attacked by aircraft coming undetected from all points on the compass and without warning from America’s renowned intelligence agencies. Worse, state of the art communications failed to report the exact number of casualties.

This article seems to tell readers that the USA is not as powerful as commonly thought. For the preponderance of Arab commentators, the phrases “misuse of power” and “abuse” of moral foundations express the overwhelming sentiment in the region that U.S. policy is unfairly biased toward Israel and America support for unjust policies, such as the devastating U.N. sanctions against Iraq. But in the absence of concrete evidence about the identity of the perpetrators, many in the Arab press offered broad critiques of U.S. foreign policy. Cautioning that it was still too early to determine who was behind the attacks, Faisal Salman, writing in Beirut’s daily *Al-Safir* (Sept. 12), remarked that while the enmity required to inspire mass murder such as that seen in New York and Washington is difficult to imagine, it does reflect the “degree of frustration, despair, and hatred that America inspires, calling for a very long moment of reflection” about U.S. policies. Perhaps the attacks will spark a moment of American self-examination, he speculates. “The strike is painful, but it may push the American people to ask: Why are the terrorists targeting us? The U.S. administration will have to provide an answer to its people’s question.” Condemning the terrorism and echoing a similar sentiment, the Palestinian expatriate *Al-Quds al-Arabi* of London (Sept. 12), in its main editorial, told its readers that it has a “duty to call upon American citizens to ask why, among the interests and embassies of all Western powers, is it their country’s embassies, buildings, and defense establishments that are targeted by such terrorist actions?”

## ISRAEL

9/11 is viewed differently in Israel. In an article in *Ma’ariv*, titled, “The Beginning of the End of Terror” it states:

This is the reality that we have faced for many months, and only now will the Western world understand its implications. One can assume that in France suicide bombers will no longer be referred to as freedom fighters and that Belgium, Denmark, and the rest of Europe will not lend legitimacy to the struggle’s terrible character, which dictates killing people, women, and so on, simply as a means to [the reward of] 100 virgins in heaven.

In *The Jerusalem Post*, perspectives about the attacks are also rooted and inseparable from the current Israeli-Palestinian paradigm “Now I know how the Israelis feel” (*Melissa Radler*). The *JP* argues that the U.S. should stop beating around the bush and calls its response to terrorism what it really is -- the West vs. Islam. “Only containment by overwhelming force can enable the West to successfully resist its deadly challenges,” writes *JP*. But satisfying this week’s Israel/Palestine theme, the article finally inserts indignation at recent U.S. demands that Israel show more restraint in the wake of top-level Israeli Cabinet member Rechavam Zeevi’s assassination, arguing that the U.S. should stop placating the terrorists themselves, meaning Arafat, and cease “forcing Israel to make dangerous concessions to Arab terrorism.” *The Jerusalem Post* itself even editorializes, albeit extremely subtly, that the U.S. and Israel are in it together-- and the only way to avoid future terrorist attacks in both countries is to “take on Saddam.” Note, this is the only newspaper found that mentions Saddam Hussein. The *JP* also reports, “Palestinians celebrated upon hearing about the attack, calling it fit and proper response to US support for Israel”.

## Conclusion

There are several conclusions that can be drawn from this analysis of the media coverage on the day of and after September 11, 2001. The way in which the front page news articles across the world framed the event will shape history forever. There were several competing narratives regarding September 11<sup>th</sup> found in the American, European, and Middle East press.

The headlines of the American press largely showed a sense of shock and drama. Words of disbelief were threaded through the headlines with words such as “TERROR” and “UNTHINKABLE”. Furthermore, the images found on the front pages of the newspapers were primarily concerned with the World Trade Center. The most popular picture was that “moment of impact” photo in which the towers stood with smoke billowing out. American newspapers showed several more pictures of the World Trade Center being attacked than the international press did, which more often depicted a far out panoramic picture of New York City or an aftermath wreckage photo. Visually the images are important because they shape our perception of the event. Furthermore, by only showing images of the World Trade Center on the cover and failing to give pictures of the attack on the Pentagon, the latter is largely forgotten in our visual memories. How does a lack of Pentagon imagery affect our perceptions? In the “age of show business,” as Neil Postman explains, our society discounts events that are not visually recorded. Without understanding that the World Trade Center represents our economic and foreign policy, which throughout history has exploited and suppressed people around the world, many Americans forget that the attack was deliberately political in nature. Many are likely to see the attack on the Pentagon as political because it is clearly a government building, but the attack on the World Trade Center is less obvious for someone who doesn’t have a great understanding of economic and foreign policy. Thus, front page images of the attack on the Pentagon are important in the sense that they could have shown the reader that the ac-



tions of the terrorists are rational for they are not just “fanatical fundamentalists” on a joyride to kill thousands.

What we found from this analysis is that the American news coverage focused on events and details largely from the perspective of the American government. While technical questions were the focus of debate, important questions were forgotten. As Michael Traugott and Ted Brader explains this further,

...the coverage of motives, goals, or explanations gets short shrift. Paletz (1985) found that less than 6% of newspaper coverage was devoted to such explanations, and the vast majority of coverage (almost 75%) ignored causes or objectives. Atwater (1987) found that less than 3% of network television coverage was devoted to these kinds of explanations. Studies of the labeling of perpetrators with such terms as “guerillas,” “terrorists,” or “insurgents” suggests the selective use of such terms by journalists in ways that correspond to the interest of the government (Epstein, 1977).

The World Trade Center is a symbol of the capitalist system that exploits much of the “Third World” through its trading policies. One could attribute the World Trade Center as the heart of this oppressive economic system. The Pentagon is a symbol of the military system that attacks people around the world. It is the brain of the American foreign policy. On the day of or after September 11<sup>th</sup> in both the American and European press, there was little explanation about the significance of these buildings. There was no discussion as to what the buildings represent. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were probably done for reasons rooted to economic and foreign policy. Instead, the questions that were asked in the American press were immediately “Who did it? Why now? And how did they do it?” Yet, the larger questions of why the attacks occurred were brushed off. The explanation, if given at all in the American press, consisted of quotes from President Bush explaining that the terrorists attacked America “because we’re the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world.” In using this as an explanation for the event, the media failed to reveal the larger answers. Thus, the media merely became a tool for the government by not discrediting Bush’s explanation for the attacks.

Why was there no in-depth questioning about the motivations of the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> in the press? There are several reasons for this and not just one simple answer. Perhaps one of the main reasons is that the American press was concerned with not appearing sympathetic enough in a time of crisis. They did not want to appear unpatriotic. Herman and Chomsky, author of *Manufacturing Consent*, refers to this as flak. Another filter that explains why the motivations were not explained is the result of the way they sourced information. As stated above, President Bush’s state of union address was used most of the time to explain the event. The sources of information the American newspapers relied on were probably the White House, Pentagon and State department. Government sources have the great merit of being recognizable and credible by their status and prestige, yet this doesn’t necessarily mean their statements are valid. Another reason for the heavy weight given to official sources is because the

media wants to be “objective dispensers of news” says Herman and Chomsky. The American newspapers explained the event as an attack against the “free democratic world” as a “battle between good and evil” or as a “fight of religions.” This same narrative was also heard in Israeli newspapers, furthering the point that Americans can understand what the Jewish people endure.

The European newspapers did a lot more of explaining the political backgrounds behind the attacks. They mentioned American foreign policy as one of the possible reasons for the motivations of the terrorist attacks. Nevertheless, there was not much explanation of the economic roots of the World Trade Center. They avoided discussing how the World Trade Center is a symbol of the economic system which runs trading and foreign policies. A theme in the European press was the claim that America should pose the question of “what are the roots of September 11<sup>th</sup>?” In some ways the press was highly critical, such as the French newspaper, *Le Monde Diplomatique*:

Throughout the world, and particularly in the countries of the South, the most common public reaction to the attacks in New York and Washington has been: what happened in New York was sad but the US deserved it.”

(...) it is worth recalling that throughout the Cold War the US was involved in a crusade against communism. Sometimes that involved mass exterminations. Thousands of communists killed in Iran, 200,000 opposition leftists killed in Guatemala; almost 1 million communists killed in Indonesia. Atrocities filled the pages of the black book of American imperialism during those years—years that also saw the horrors of the Vietnam War (1962-45). This too was marketed as a battle between good and evil.

In comparison to the American and European press, the Arab press used blunt language when describing the attack. Their reaction was not that of surprise. Rather they saw it as a logic consequence of American foreign policy. They focused on the imperialistic policies of the United States in their explanation of the event.

Our investigation of the media showed to what extent the American media is living in a political island. Someone who informed oneself of the attacks by reading only American newspapers just after the attacks would have a quite narrow image of the events that took place on 9/11. On the days after the attack, the American press failed to give a variety of foreign perspectives which created a monolithic understanding of the situation. Pluralism is important for democracy and in order to gain a variety of views, one must have access to a wide array of media outlets. While the sources are available, our media culture does not promote the seeking of knowledge outside the mainstream.

*“You can’t really have all this stuff on the front pages, so you have to push it off the front pages. You have to keep people from thinking about it. And there’s only one way that anybody ever figured out: to frighten people. And they’re good at it.”* --Noam Chomsky

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Neil Postman. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. New York: Viking Press, 1986 p. 74
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid, Neil Postman. p. 73
- <sup>3</sup> Such as *September11News.com*, A.D. Williams. 2001- 2003 [www.september11news.com](http://www.september11news.com) and *Tocsin.net*, “Les Unes de la presse quotidienne internationale, [www.tocsin.net/dossier/usattack/index\\_international2.htm](http://www.tocsin.net/dossier/usattack/index_international2.htm)”
- <sup>4</sup> [www.acs-onweb.de/hd/content/press-c/section/press-sec-moser-millerDFH.html](http://www.acs-onweb.de/hd/content/press-c/section/press-sec-moser-millerDFH.html)
- <sup>5</sup> Such as *Freedom Files Website*, ( Rob Hay ) 2003 <http://www.freedomfiles.org/war/pentagon.htm>, *L’Asile Utopique* “Pentagon Hunt the Boeing!” Translation by Sly. [http://www.asile.org/citoyens/numero13/pentagone/erreurs\\_en.htm](http://www.asile.org/citoyens/numero13/pentagone/erreurs_en.htm), *Pentagon surveillance cctv 2001/9/11: Where are the missing frames?* <http://perso.wanadoo.fr/jpdesm/pentagon/archive/english1.html>, William Lewis, *9/11 in Plane Site*, Bridgestone Media. 2004 <http://www.policestate21.com/>,
- <sup>6</sup> Bennett, W. Lance, “News Content: Four Information Biases That Matter.” *The Politics of Illusion* (2001). New York: Wesley Longman, Inc. p. 47
- <sup>7</sup> Joe Marren, *September 11, 2001: A collection of newspaper front pages selected by the Poynter Institute* <http://www.copydesk.org/books/marren2.htm>
- <sup>8</sup> Found on *September11News.com*, A.D. Williams. 2001- 2003 [www.september11news.com](http://www.september11news.com)
- <sup>9</sup> Bennett, W. Lance, “News Content: Four Information Biases That Matter.” *The Politics of Illusion* (2001). New York: Wesley Longman, Inc. p. 48
- <sup>10</sup> <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/latimes/results.htm>
- <sup>11</sup> *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/12/national/12ASSE.html?ex=1102482000&en=d20f158aae183fe&ei=5070>
- <sup>12</sup> *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>
- <sup>13</sup> *USA TODAY*, <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/USAToday/search.html>
- <sup>14</sup> *The Wall Street Journal Online* <http://online.wsj.com/public/us>
- <sup>15</sup> *The Washington Post Company*, 200, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn?pagename=article&contentId=A14035-2001Sep11&notFound=true>
- <sup>16</sup> *Le Monde.fr*, 2004 <http://www.lemonde.fr/>
- <sup>17</sup> Jean-Marie Colombani, *Le Monde* (liberal), Paris, France, Sept. 12, 2001. <http://www.lemonde.fr/web/recherche/1,13-0,1-0,0.html>
- <sup>18</sup> *lefigaro.fr*, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/cgi/perm/archives/find?url=http://newportal.cedrom-sni.com/httpref/intro.asp&user=lefigaro&partID=lefigaro/>
- <sup>19</sup> *Guardian Newspapers Limited* 2005. Seumas Milne Thursday September 13, 2001, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/>
- <sup>20</sup> Seumas Milne, *They can't see why they are hated*, Guardian Unlimited, 2004 [www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,3604,551036,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,3604,551036,00.html)

- <sup>21</sup> AP, *Bush says bombings were “act of war”*, 2005, Independent News & Media (UK) Ltd. <http://news.independent.co.uk/world/americas/story.jsp?story=93716>
- <sup>22</sup> *Financial Times.com*, <http://www.interactivepublishing.net/september/782png/45.png>
- <sup>23</sup> *Diario EL PAÍS S.L.* - Miguel Yuste 40 - 28037 Madrid [España], <http://www.elpais.es/archivo/buscador.html>
- <sup>24</sup> Rest of the article: “We have tried out best in the past and we are willing in the future to assure the United States in any kind of way we can that Osama is not involved in these kinds of activities,” the Taliban’s foreign minister Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil told reporters. Muttawakil said Tuesday’s attacks were “from a humanitarian point of view surely a loss and a very terrifying incident.” Asked whether the Taliban condemned the attacks on the United States, he said: “We have criticized and we are now again criticizing terrorism in all its forms.” Taliban Condemn Attacks in U.S., Afghan News Network, 2005 <http://www.myafghan.com/news.asp?id=642400248>
- <sup>25</sup> *The Jordan Times: For the arrogance of power America now pays a terrible price* September 12, 2001, [http://www.transnational.org/forum/power/2001/09.02\\_USpaysPrice.html](http://www.transnational.org/forum/power/2001/09.02_USpaysPrice.html)
- <sup>26</sup> From the November 2001 issue of *World Press Review* (VOL. 48, No. 11), *England: Does America Read the Signs?* [http://www.worldpress.org/1101rumideast\\_hayat.htm](http://www.worldpress.org/1101rumideast_hayat.htm), Yasser Al-Zaatra, (Saudi-owned, Arabic-language, pan Arab), London, Sept. 13, 2001.
- <sup>27</sup> From the November 2001 issue of *World Press Review* (VOL. 48, No. 11), *Egypt: Deadly Blow* [http://www.worldpress.org/1101rumideast\\_egypt.htm](http://www.worldpress.org/1101rumideast_egypt.htm), Cairo, Sept 12, 2001
- <sup>28</sup> From the November 2001 issue of *World Press Review* (VOL. 48, No. 11) *The Arab Press Sends Mixed Messages*, [http://www.worldpress.org/1101arabpress\\_joel.htm](http://www.worldpress.org/1101arabpress_joel.htm), Yael Paz Melamed, (centrist), Tel Aviv, Sept. 13, 2001.
- <sup>29</sup> From the November 2001 issue of *World Press Review* (VOL. 48, No. 11) *The Arab Press Sends Mixed Messages*, [http://www.worldpress.org/1101arabpress\\_joel.htm](http://www.worldpress.org/1101arabpress_joel.htm), Yael Paz Melamed, (centrist), Tel Aviv, Sept. 13, 2001.
- <sup>30</sup> <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/jpost/>
- <sup>31</sup> *The Jerusalem Post* 1995 - 2005. <http://www.jpost.com/>
- <sup>32</sup> Michael Traugott and Ted Brader, “Patterns in the American News Coverage of the September 11 Attacks and Their Consequences,” *Harvard Symposium: Restless Searchlight: The Media and Terrorism*, p.2
- <sup>33</sup> *Statement by the President in His Address to the Nation*, The White House, 2001, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010911-16.html>
- <sup>34</sup> Herman, Edward S. (1988). *Manufacturing consent: the political economy of the mass media*. New York: Pantheon Books. (January 15, 2002) p. 19
- <sup>35</sup> Ignacio Ramonet: An enemy . At last Le monde diplomatique October 2001. <http://mondedeiplo.com/2001/10/01leader>