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Changing Patterns in American Journalism after 9/11: From 'Language Wars' to Social Responsibility

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ABSTRACT

The course of American print journalism underwent a shift in patterns after 9/11, in media narratives and reporting. It makes the case that American newspapers changed from being a market-driven and libertarian medium to one that was framed by a sense of community mourning, patriotism, and occasionally social obligation. The study examines the spread of "false positives" regarding conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, the emergence of patriotic subjectivity that blurred the lines between advocacy and objectivity, and the "language wars" that reinforced a Manichaeian worldview of good versus evil. Even though there were examples of socially conscious reporting, like the reportage of Abu Ghraib, that showed how journalism can be corrected, the general trend showed a propensity for stereotyping, alignment with government rhetoric, and the marginalisation of critical inquiry. The study highlights the need for professional rigour and ethical responsibility in crisis reporting by observing these changing tendencies. Language and story framing have a significant influence on public opinion and democratic accountability in this field.

Keywords: 9/11, Afghanistan, Iraq, language wars

Introduction

Some people are always grumbling because roses have thorns; I am thankful that thorns have roses.¹

The reality is contingent upon perception as it has the ability to remodel the course of thinking. People craft reality through what they perceive, and it is perception that turns reality into sad and happy memories. Media is one such perception making machine that has the potential to turn the mind sets of people and it can ordain them how to behave in a particular situation. The proverb 'the pen is mightier than the sword' articulates conspicuously about the power of print media over our lives. The 9/11 is one such reality that has many facets and its cross puzzles have changed the course of action of American Journalism, journalists' mind sets and as a result changing patterns have emerged out in the post 9/11 era. The present paper illustrates that how immediate after September 11, American Print Media adopted a patriotic fervor to cater the concern of its citizens, and how the sensationalism has been replaced by socially responsible attitude.

¹ Alphonse Karr,

<http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/31993-some-people-grumble-that-roses-have-thorns-i-am-grateful>



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Money Making Machine Turns into an Instrument of Democracy

US media is conceived to be libertarian and profit-making scheme is mostly catered by the owners of media outlets. An Economic Theory of News Selection by John McManus explains this trend of profit making. In his perspective, the aspect of economic benefit is the primal variable which news outlets caters for when covering any event, and any such event that does not have the market aspect, is generally not covered in media. This cost and benefit analysis is thus what makes a news newsworthy enough to be published. McManus is of the view that one of the darker aspects of these money-making practices is the lack of social responsibility on the part of the news media.²

But as in a trauma situation, the media adopts some extraordinary routine, which prior to 9/11 had been witnessed during the Vietnam War. The 9/11 served as a platform which temporarily compelled journalists to work together to tell stories.

Cynthia Cotts, a journalist expressed the same change in pattern in the Village Voice;

The newspapers and the networks stopped behaving like competing profit machines and strove to be the instruments of democracy, producing a high volume of useful news and inspiring a nation under siege.³

Under the new arisen trauma of 9/11, news agencies put aside their competitive spirit of profit making and ratings, and what developed was a 'convergence story' that enabled the journalists to work together to bring the nation out of crises.⁴ It seemed once again that Thomas Jefferson's views were put into action by US media and the role of media in a democratic society echoed with the slogan 'would prefer newspapers without government to government without newspapers.'⁵ Newspapers like the New York Times, USA Today, Chicago Tribune etc, took the role of traditional 'provider of analysis' and adopted various strategies such as running more pictures, using bold texts and some newspaper brought out special editions.⁶

It is often argued that Government has the right to regulate media in extreme times such as war, as the free flow of information might lead to chaos in a society. Though American Government did not directly intervene in media matters, but what media represented was in parallel with White House's policies.

'The argument from democracy holds that government regulation may be necessary to ensure that the media provide the kind of information and debate required for an informed electorate.'⁷

But side by side, media's role after September 11 was put under criticism; it is argued that though media became an instrument of democracy but only in certain cases as an in-depth analysis of US Government's performance was missing. To an extreme, it is argued that media became more of a lapdog instead of a watch dog of the US Government.⁸

² John McManus. "An Economic theory of News Selection"

<http://www.eric.ed.gov>

³ Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan, 'When trauma shapes the news' *Journalism After September 11*. ed. By Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan, New York; Taylor and Francis, 2002

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Thomas Jefferson, 'To Edward Carrington.' January 16, 1787. Letter. Online Library of Liberty, *The Works*, vol. 5 Correspondence 1786-1789.

http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=802&chapter=86653&layout=html&Itemid=27#a_1991444

⁶ Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan, 'When trauma shapes the news' *Journalism After September 11*. ed. By Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan, New York; Taylor and Francis, 2002

⁷ David Kelley and Roger Donway, 'Liberalism and free speech'. *Democracy and Mass Media*. Ed by Judith Lichtenberg. New York; Cambridge University Press, 1990. Pg.67.

⁸ Calvin F. Kxoo, *The Pen and the Sword: Press, War and Terror in the 21st Century*. Los Angles; Sage



Language Wars

The term 'Language wars' is taken from Jeff Lewis's book *Language Wars: The Role of Media and Culture in Global Terror and Political Violence* where the author links the concept with cultural strain. But the present paper relates the term 'Language Wars' with the Manichaeian idea of good vs. evil, where rhetoric classifies people and their ideologies based on protagonist and antagonist and does not raise the question of why terrorists wanted to harm the US.

The Manichaeian ideology became the foundation of language war, where media portrayed Bush and his administration as an emblem of freedom, and they became symbol of heroism and courage not only during Afghanistan war but also after Iraq war. This impression remained unquestionable till the story of Abu Ghraib was unleashed in front of the world.

Press promoted fear after 9/11..... elevated Bush to the status of Supreme Leader, and then largely reproduced the Administration's lies and propaganda that propelled the country into the Iraq quagmire.⁹

War has made Bush a first rate commander in chief¹⁰

Global spotlight falls on Bush and he shines¹¹

Our George: the designated dragon slayer, a boyish knight in a helmet of graying hair.¹²

Soon after the collapse of twin towers 'the media hunt for the villains had began.'¹³ President Bush speeches were hugely backed up the US media. The rhetoric had once again begun, 'Us vs. Them,'¹⁴ 'Peace lovers vs. Terrorist,' 'Democracy vs. Tyranny' etc. Jeff Lewis in *Language Wars: The Role of Media and Culture in Global Terror and Political Violence* explicates that how Bush- Cheney administration had build up their discourse on key terms like 'freedom' and 'democracy.'

George Bush's war on terror has been forged around the specific discourses of western statehood, most particularly through an aggressive re-inscription of key political tropes – 'freedom', 'democracy', 'civil society' and 'rule of law'. The invocation of these tropes by the US government and its allies in the war on terror is designed to distinguish the legitimacy of the 'just war' against the iniquity of radical militancy, especially Islamic militancy.¹⁵

US media backed Bush Doctrine but what came out as a negative strand was the stereotyping of Arabs and Muslim as mere agents of terrorism. The possible threat in the choice of lexical items in the wake of 9/11 was hinted by Roy Peter, a senior scholar at

Publications, Inc., 2010

⁹ Douglas Keller, 'The Media in and After 9/11. A Review Essay. [International Journal of Communication](#). Pg. 132.

<http://www.google.com.pk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=4&ved=0CEUQFjAD&url>

¹⁰ *Hearst Newspaper*, September 25, 2001.

¹¹ *Los Angeles Times*. October 23, 2001.

¹² *Newsweek*. September 21, 2001.

¹³ Ariana Huffington, 'Blinded by Scandal'

www.salon.com

¹⁴ Eleanor Clift, 'Reviving US vs. Them Politics' *Newsweek*. August 21, 2010.

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2010/08/21/reviving-us-versus-them-politics.html>

¹⁵ Jeff Lewis, *Language Wars: The Role of Media and Culture in Global Terror and Political Violence*. London; Pluto Press, 2005.



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Poynter Institute where he poses the threat of the development of xenophobia, he is of the view ““The collateral damage of building a culture of war is xenophobia and paranoia, much of it directed at our own citizens.”¹⁶

The question arises that how US media should have acted out. The surveys show that 9/11 incident raised the interest of Americans in international affairs and public did not want traditional current affair programs, so media responded to their concerns and catered to their feelings.¹⁷ Americans were shocked by the tragedy that had befallen over them, so to provide a catharsis of public’s pent up feelings, media provided a platform to let the anger unleash.

Patriotic fervor: Shift from Objectivity to Subjectivity

Many media connoisseur criticize US print media for not only endorsing patriotic fervor but also rebuffing neutrality on basis of patriotic vehemence. James W.Carey, an analyst is of the view that media deliberately hid the intelligence failure of Cheney administration and no media outlet criticized the Government in this matter. He expresses his views in the following words:

If the conduct of the press and television on September 11, and the days and the week that followed was praiseworthy, that performance only underscored the massive failure of intelligence that lay behind the events.¹⁸

Another objection that is laid out by the media critics is that US media never tried to find the facts; it remained ambiguous that for how long President remained in the school when the twin towers were hit, what was his immediate response etc. To an extreme, critics say that ‘press never sorted out the facts of the events’¹⁹ such objections mark the shift in American journalism, objective to a subjective approach. It is, therefore, essential to identify that in what circumstances journalists move towards subjective mode of covering the stories.

Michael Schudson in ‘What’s Unusual about Covering Politics as Usual’ gives three main reasons which compel American journalists to abandon ‘neutral stance.’ ‘In Moments of tragedy, journalists assume a pastoral role’²⁰ means that they while covering stories and element of grief is added into the script and atmosphere of gloom are created. Then in moments of ‘public danger’²¹ journalists abandon objective approach. By ‘public danger’ Michael means danger posed by ‘hurricanes’ and ‘terrorists’. The third situation arises when there are ‘threats to national security’.²²

9/11 event provoked all these three reasons, there were deaths of innocent lives which implies befallen of tragedy. There were threats to public by terrorists and lastly it was a matter of national security. Under normal circumstances journalists would have cover the event by detaching themselves from the public, but it was a matter of war, so journalists had to abandon the objectivity.

¹⁶ Clark, Roy Peter. “The Language of War: Beware of the Consequences.” *Poynter Report*. 2001: 46. <http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=6320>

¹⁷ Lyn Gorman and David McLean, *Media and Society into the 21st Century: A Historical Introduction*. West Sussex; Willey Blackwell Ltd, 2009.

¹⁸ James W. Carey, ‘American Journalism On, Before and After September 11’ *Journalism After September 11*. ed. By Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan, New York; Taylor and Francis, 2002

¹⁹ Lisa Finnegan, *No Questions Asked. News Coverage Since 9/11*, Westport, Conn. And London: Praeger, 2007

²⁰ Michael Schudson, ‘What’s Unusual About Covering Politics As Usual’ *Journalism After September 11*. ed. by Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan, New York; Taylor and Francis, 2002. Pg. 41

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid



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False Positives

The term 'False Positive' is taken from Ron Suskind's *One Percent Doctrine: Deep Inside America's Pursuit of its Enemies Since 9/11*, where the author relates the concept with the false information that was given to George Bush by Cheney on various occasions; the misinformation that was presented as a ray of hope.²³ In this paper, false positive means the misinformation that was generated by US media with respect to Afghanistan and Iraq war; a false hope that US was winning the wars despite the fact that hundreds of American soldiers died during and after the wars and, left both the countries in ragged state.

Calvin F. Exoo in his book *The Pen and the Sword: Press War and Terror in the 21st Century* explicates the lies generated by US media during Afghanistan war. In his perspective, media outlets kept on declaring the war as a victory. But in reality, Afghanistan still lies in ragged state.²⁴

Following headlines ran through the newspapers which told the narratives of victory and shifting of US focus from war to rebuilding of Afghanistan which in reality proved to be a dream.

Al Qaeda crumbling under massive attack²⁵

Allied Forces say they've cornered Osama Bin Laden²⁶

US shifts focus, Troops from Tora Bora²⁷

On the other hand, the Iraq war in 2003 was presented by US media as another narrative of victory. But before that the case of weapon of mass destruction needs to be analyzed. The media fueled with news about the presence of WMD in Iraq. *Time* writes 'disarm Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.'²⁸ Calvin F.Exoo, a media analyst is of the view;

This press may credulity may explain a miraculous paradox: Despite the fact that Iraq had no WMD, the news media reported again and again that they had been discovered.²⁹

The declaration of 'mission accomplished' is praised by US media as a triumph. The media over saw the war that was about to begin. The victory had been glorified by US media, but the years followed narrated a quite different story.

The citizen soldiers. In two weeks.....thousands of comrades in arms, brother soldiers and Marines... performed a truly remarkable feat. In a 350 mile dash across the desert, through ambushes and over the shattered remnants of Saddam's army, they arrived at the gate of Baghdad.³⁰

Though US media presented false pictures of various events yet from time to time, it had been correcting its stories. When Fox News declared that WMD had been found, then New York Times stepped in and debunked the story as false.

Change of Perspective: 'I' to 'We'

Both the wars, Afghanistan and Iraq changed the way American journalists' way of

²³ Ron Suskind, *The One Percent Doctrine: Deep Inside America's Pursuit of its Enemies Since 9/11*. London; Simon and Schuster Ltd, 2006.

²⁴ Calvin F. Exoo, *The Pen and the Sword: Press War and Terror*. Los Angeles; Sage Publications, Inc., 2010

²⁵ *New York Daily News*. December 9, 2001.

²⁶ *New York Times*. December 14, 2001

²⁷ *Wall Street Journal*. January 9, 2002

²⁸ *Time*. February 3, 2003.

²⁹ Calvin F. Exoo, *The Pen and the Sword: Press War and Terror*. Los Angeles; Sage Publications, Inc., 2010. Pg.120

³⁰ *Newsweek*. April 14, 2003



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thinking. The dominant pattern that has been witnessed during the wars was change of perspective from 'I' to 'We.' The journalists no longer considered themselves in isolation covering an emotionally detached story but now they felt deep attachment with the victims. From a linguistic perspective, the aspect of clusivity can be observed, where inclusive "we" is used to position journalists as part of the grieving members. 'There is also a 'sphere of consensus' in which journalists feel free to invoke a generalized 'we'³¹. The change had been conscious.

Some journalists were prepared immediately for this shift however and warned of the potential consequences of the new way stories were to be framed.³²

Many American journalists who reported about September 11 and later the war on Afghanistan felt good about their work. "At last!" they seemed sighing. This is what journalism is about!³³

Journalists invoked "we" to create a **shared emotional framework**, blurring the boundary between reporter and citizen. For instance, in USA Today and Washington Post columns, reporters expressed grief as if it were a **collective American experience**, e.g., "We mourn, we remember, we rebuild."³⁴

For example, The New York Times editorial board frequently used "we" to collectively grieve with the nation: "We are all New Yorkers now."³⁵

Socially Responsible Model and unleashing of Abu Ghraib story

Though American media is based upon libertarian model, but in war times it does adopt socially responsible model of news production. Such model has been previously observed during Vietnam War. most media experts expound this model with reference to the story of Abu Ghraib, yet the model was also applied immediate after the 9/11 attacks especially by the Time. 'Portraits of Grief' evidently is the evidence that print media felt grievances over the loss of innocent lives and narrated their stories to the world. Moreover, the names of missing persons were also brought into limelight by American media to facilitate the relatives of missing persons.

Stories of missing and deceased from the various communities became a hallmark of the September 11 coverage, as staffers at numerous newspapers including editors, helped write obituaries.³⁶

In 2004, the program 60 Minutes II broke the story of physical torture by American soldiers in Abu Ghraib prison, Iraq. It provided the necessary evidence, in this case photographs related to physical torture.³⁷ The American magazine New Yorker on May

³¹ D.C. Halin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and the Vietnam*. New York; Oxford University Press, 1986. Pg. 117

³² '9/11 Effects On US Media And Policy'

<http://terrpress.personal.asu.edu/?p=215>

³³ Michael Schudson, 'What's Unusual About Covering Politics as Usual' *Journalism After September 11*. ed. by Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan, New York; Taylor and Francis, 2002. Pg. 41

³⁴ Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2004). *Talking about my Generation: The News Media as a Discursive Construction of Age Identity*. *Journalism Studies*, 5(2), 175–198.

³⁵ Schudson, M. (2002). *What's Unusual about Covering Politics as Usual*. In Barbie Zelizer & Stuart Allan (Eds.), *Journalism After September 11*. London: Routledge.

³⁶ Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan, 'When trauma shapes the news' *Journalism After September 11*. ed. By Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan, New York; Taylor and Francis, 2002. Pg. 08

³⁷ Daniel Schorn, 'Exposing The Truth Of Abu Ghraib.' *CBS News*. June 21. 2007
http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-18560_162-2238188.html



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10, 2004, published a story named ‘Torture at Abu Ghraib’ which sparked social responsibility among American journalists. But critics view that soon the lexical item ‘torture’ was replaced by a softer word ‘abuse.’

Thus, we attribute the ultimate collapse of the torture policy frame in news about Abu Ghraib to the mainstream press’s well-documented tendency to follow the lead of high institutional authorities and,

Correspondingly, to have trouble elevating available challenging perspectives when sources at institutional power points fail to corroborate them. The “torture policy” counter frame was pushed out of the news by a deluge of official events that promoted the “isolated abuse” frame, an effect reinforced by a lack of high-level public debate on torture such as occurred much later around Senator [John] McCain’s [anti-torture] amendment. The curious result of these intertwined event-driven and official news management dynamics is a semi-independent press characterized by moments of relative independence within a more general pattern of compliance with government news management...³⁸

It is interesting to note that though the torture frame was replaced by abuse frame, yet the pictures of prisoners at Abu Ghraib published in the magazines like Newsweek, Time and others speak louder than the words. Most often one hears the fallacy of generalization, but newspapers avoided that and whatever they could find, they published it.

Conclusion

The post 9/11 epoch has witnessed changes in the way American journalists work; it has also changed their frame. But changes in patterns narrate that whenever journalist changed their perspective, they had reasons behind it. Though the aspect of propaganda cannot be denied, it is sufficient to say that on various occasions the media have been correcting their mistakes. American print journalism underwent a significant reconfiguration in the years following 9/11, as the demands of political debate, public opinion, and national trauma all combined to change professional practice. It has been observed in the research that, though the American media expounds on the libertarian model, journalists aligned themselves with a ‘We’ orientation that linked them under nationalist and governmental dominant fervour after 9/11.

This shift helped a grieving public, but it also made it harder for journalism to serve as a watchdog and encouraged political compliance, false information, and stereotyping. However, events such as the Abu Ghraib exposé demonstrate that democratic values and authority could still be upheld by socially conscious journalism. The conflict between professionalism and patriotism that emerged during this time emphasises how urgently a media framework based on factual integrity, ethical duty, and critical distance is needed. Such a structure is necessary during times of crisis to protect public confidence, prevent polarisation, and guarantee that the media fulfils its democratic function rather than turning into a vehicle for the interests of the state or the market.

³⁸ W. Lance Bennett, Regina G. Lawrence, and Steven Livingston. *When the Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media from Iraq to Katrina*. Chicago; University of Chicago press, 2007. Pg 105-106