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09/11/01: Observations on How Journalism Differed on this Day

By

Gregory J. Lindberg

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the University Honors Program University of South Florida, St. Petersburg

May 1, 2009

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On September 11, 2001, life in the United States of America and around the world changed forever. Terrorists hijacked four commercial jets and flew them into the World Trade Center towers in New York, the Pentagon building in Washington, D.C., and into a barren field in rural Pennsylvania. Nearly 3,000 people were killed that day, marking the deadliest single-day tragedy in American history.\(^1\)

Media coverage of the September 11 attacks was in many ways less conventional than traditional coverage of any other event, primarily because of the extraordinary nature of the acts with planes full of passengers and fuel crashing into towers full of innocent people. In addition, each local TV station and network covering the morning’s events offered something a little different compared to one another. Viewers tuned in to one station received a news presentation that was unique compared to the broadcasts of the same event on other channels. It was as if a group of people was watching an event unfold in front of them, and each person reacted differently to what they saw, even though everyone witnessed the same event. This method of coverage framed this historic day in American history in a way unlike the news reporting on any other event of comparable magnitude.

Many broadcast journalists reacted to what they saw while live on the air. Most had no time to prepare for both the initial crash and the subsequent ones, especially when the second plane struck the South Tower on live television. The dynamics of journalism changed temporarily on this particular day as the role of journalists became more about relating to Americans and talking about the events of the day than purely being objective.
reporters of news. The media landscape also seemed to shift from claims of partisanship at certain networks to a more unified media simply because of how Americans as a whole came together during the events of this horrific and unprecedented day.

The attacks occurred during the morning hours of Tuesday, September 11, 2001 when many Americans were getting ready for work in the east or were still asleep in the west. This is why most Americans did not see the initial coverage of the attacks. They happened so fast and were so unexpected. President George W. Bush had been in office for just over eight months at the time. When the attacks took place, Bush was in Sarasota, Florida speaking to a group of students at Emma E. Booker Elementary School. Andrew Card, Bush’s Chief of Staff, informed him of the first crash in New York shortly after the first plane struck the North Tower of the World Trade Center.\[2\]

The attacks occurred within a short amount of time for both the planes’ departure and crash times. The four airliners all crashed within less than 90 minutes that morning, between 8:46 a.m. and 10:07 a.m. Eastern Standard Time. The first two planes went down in New York and struck the twin towers. The third jet hit the Pentagon, while the fourth plane was taken down in a rural field some 80 miles southeast of Pittsburgh.\[3\] Reports indicated that the final flight’s passengers had received word of the previous three hijacked planes and took action to prevent their plane from crashing into a major structure or populated area.

The 9/11 attacks occurred at a time when many of the network morning shows were still on the air, such as the Today show on NBC and Good Morning America on ABC. In addition, by 2001 the 24-hour cable news networks had already become a major source of news for TV viewers. Regularly scheduled programming was interrupted on
these stations. Some stations broke directly into their commercial breaks to alert viewers of the latest information on the attacks, emphasizing how important it was to get this information out as quickly as possible. The transmitter sites of several New York TV and radio stations were also damaged during the attacks as many of these transmitters sat atop the twin towers.[5] This caused some reception issues for viewers in New York who did not have cable. However, there was a great deal of misinformation broadcast by the media about what actually occurred after the first plane hit the North Tower. Further confusion and fear ensued when the second plane hit the other tower and the other two airliners went down. This whole series of events gave broadcast journalists an incredible challenge to keep Americans informed about the events while trying to remain calm during a shocking and terrifying day for everyone. In some ways, the conventions of journalism were set aside during this initial coverage due to the shock and awe of what was happening.

Coverage of Plane Crashes and Tower Collapses

I. First Plane Crash – North Tower

Every media outlet, both locally and nationally, each had a somewhat unique take on the initial plane crash. Each used different words to describe what most believed had occurred. Some outlets were more general in their interpretation of the crash, while others ran the risk of reporting false information. The reporting of rumors that turned out to be false did occur in several cases.

The first news report of the incidents was broadcast by WNYW-TV Channel 5, the local Fox television station in New York City. The station broke directly into a
commercial promoting the *Zoolander* film. The first voice viewers heard reporting the apparent crash was that of Dick Oliver, a field reporter for the station, at 8:48 a.m. Oliver had originally been assigned to cover New York City’s Democratic primary elections for mayor but had to quickly change his reporting duties. Oliver said, “Just a few moments ago, something believed to be a plane crashed into the South Tower of the World Trade Center.” Oliver’s words demonstrated the initial confusion of what actually hit the tower, or if it was even a crash at all. Using the phrase “something believed to be a plane” rather than saying exactly what it was showed the initial hesitation to report news without confirming it from multiple witnesses or verifying it from another source. The station also incorrectly reported that the South Tower was the first building hit, when in fact it was the North Tower that took the first blow. The fact that the towers are within such close proximity could have hindered Oliver’s view of them from a distance. But the mistake appears to be more glaring in retrospect compared to the chaos that was happening at that exact moment.

The WNYW report differed from a more general approach taken by WCBS-TV Channel 2 in New York, which stated that a plane had crashed into “one of the two towers…and we’re not sure if that’s Building 1 or 2.” Journalists at NY1, a local 24-hour news channel in New York City, initially referred to the first crash as simply “an explosion” and never used the word “crash.” At the national level, Fox News Channel first reported it to be a “tragic alert” to viewers and then went on to give details about what they knew regarding the apparent crash. On WABC-TV Channel 7 out of New York City at 8:51 a.m., an announcer’s voice stated that there was a special report, which was followed by a “special report” graphic. An anchor then came on camera and said, “Good
evening everyone, or good morning actually. He was so caught off-guard that he wasn’t aware of what time of day it was, or at least it appeared that there was a great amount of confusion in the station’s newsroom. He went on to say that, “A plane has allegedly crashed into the World Trade Center,” not giving any specifics of which building it hit or how big the plane was.\[4\]

On NBC’s Today show at 8:51 a.m., host Matt Lauer was interviewing Richard Hack, an author promoting his latest book, Hughes, about Howard Hughes. Lauer interrupted the interview and said, “We want to go live right now and show you a picture of the World Trade Center where I understand... do we have it? No we do not. We have a breaking story and we’re going to come back with that in just a moment. First, this is Today on NBC.”\[7\]\[8\] The fact that Lauer hardly gave a clue as to what had happened at the twin towers – followed by the network taking a commercial break right away – was a bit odd at first. Lauer only stated that something had occurred there. Perhaps the network’s producers used this as a teaser to get viewers to come back after the commercial; however, this type of promotion of an upcoming story should not apply to breaking news. But the visual nature of the disaster proved to be more important. So since NBC was evidently unable to get a live feed of the twin towers on the screen at that particular moment, the producers waited until after the break to show pictures of what was occurring rather than telling viewers in words about it before going to commercial. Also, perhaps NBC had to take a break at a certain time due to the network’s obligations to its affiliate stations. Local stations in New York not affiliated with a network morning show had a bit more freedom to alter their schedules and cut directly into commercials to report the news.
Lauer and co-host Katie Couric came back from commercial, and Couric said they had “very little information” about what happened. They went right to an eyewitness named Jennifer Oberstein, who was on the phone to get her account of what she saw and her initial reaction. “I heard a big boom, looked up, and there was a big ball of fire,” she said right after the first plane struck the North Tower. She initially did not know what had caused the fire until the anchors told her about the reports that it was an apparent plane crash. Oberstein, an employee at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Manhattan’s Battery Park, was obviously shaken up by what she had seen. Her voice was trembling on the phone as she gave her observations. [8]

The first CNN report was shown at 8:49 a.m. – just seconds after WNYW broke the news to its local New York audience. The graphic on the screen read “Breaking News: World Trade Center Disaster.” [9] The word “disaster” – instead of saying “plane crash” or “fire” – used at the very beginning of the coverage again emphasized the unknown details about what really occurred at the site of the twin towers. It was a more broad approach to use this term rather than a more specific description.

II. Second Plane Crash – South Tower

The second plane’s collision with the South Tower may have been one of the most dramatic news events to occur on live television. Many TV networks carried it live as they were continuing to cover the result of first crash. Their cameras were already pointing in the direction of the twin towers, so it made it very easy to show the second crash. At the time, most stations were showing images of the North Tower fire and getting eyewitness phone accounts from people on the street with what they observed.
WNYW had several anchors on the air when the second plane collided with the South Tower. One anchor said, “Oh my goodness, there’s another one.” A woman gasped in the background, and a male voice said, “Oh God!” just as the camera showed the impact.\textsuperscript{10} This exemplifies how journalists literally reacted to the news on the air — a complete shift from the typical objectivity a news broadcaster is generally required to possess. Because it was such a dramatic scene with obvious significant life loss, anchors began to editorialize more by expressing their opinions of the situation, which provided context to the news but also gave viewers the sense that journalists were witnessing the horror together with viewers. Everyone was essentially in the same boat, but journalists simply had a larger outlet to express their feelings on the situation compared to the average American.

On the \textit{Today} show, eyewitness Elliott Walker, a producer for the show who was out on personal time, was on the phone talking about the first plane crash that she had heard. This was one example of how journalists who were off work had to come back in to cover the day’s events. But as soon as she saw the second plane hit, she interrupted the interview about the first crash with an emotional outburst on the second one. “Oh, another one just hit!” she screamed. “Something else just hit. A very large plane just flew over my building and there’s been another collision.”\textsuperscript{11}

In a rare instance of an eyewitness actually asking a question of the journalists covering it, Walker asked hosts Matt Lauer and Katie Couric if they could see what she just saw from the camera shot being shown on NBC. Lauer initially speculated that it was a smaller plane and was not as significant an impact as the first jet’s crash. But once he realized what had happened, he said, “Now you have to move from talk about a possible
accident to talk about something deliberate. At this moment, the idea of a terrorist attack entered the minds of journalists and Americans alike.

CNN reacted more cautiously to the second plane crash compared to some of the other coverage. The network showed a live feed from WABC-TV out of New York City. A male anchor was interviewing a witness named Winston when the second plane collided with the South Tower. Winston, who was on the phone inside a diner, became noticeably upset about what he just saw and screamed into the phone, “The building’s exploding right now! You’ve got people running up the street! The people here are panicking.” The anchor took him off the air quickly and put him on hold, telling viewers, “I just don’t want to panic here on the air.” Meanwhile he had been giving very specific and accurate accounts of the scene around him even though his tone of voice was louder than normal. In some ways, the network may have shown some bias by cutting him off to avoid reporting some of the details of what was happening. Misinformation about this led some witnesses to report to CNN that the first plane’s fuselage remained in the North Tower and helped cause the second explosion, which is what the anchor said. But it was actually the second plane hitting the South Tower that caused the explosion and subsequent fire. Trying to avert speculation, the anchor mentioned that a producer told him about the possibility of a second plane being involved. “Let’s not even speculate to the point, but at least put it out there that perhaps that may have happened,” he said.¹²

The local WABC anchor in New York City on the air at the time of the second plane crash called it “spectacular pictures” when the station showed a replay of the crash since the anchor and producers were unsure of its impact when it initially aired live. “These pictures are frightening indeed,” a male anchor said. He speculated that perhaps
some type of navigation equipment with the Federal Aviation Administration had gone awry and had sent two planes into the towers within about 18 minutes of each other. “That is a very hard thing to watch,” said a female anchor on WNYW. Another eyewitness on the phone speculated that it may have been a missile attack on the twin towers rather than airplanes, but the anchor on this station quickly jumped in and said that reports of the explosions being caused by airplanes were more substantiated.[13] On NBC, Matt Lauer said, “What we’ve just seen is about the most shocking video tape I’ve ever seen.”

On ABC, Charlie Gibson and Diane Sawyer were anchoring that network’s coverage. They were talking to someone on the phone when Sawyer could be heard quietly saying after the second impact, “My God. Dear Lord.” Gibson said, “That looks like a second plane has just hit. We just saw another plane coming in from the side. So this looks like it is some sort of a concerted effort to attack the World Trade Center that is underway in downtown New York.”[14]

III. Third Plane Crash – Pentagon

The first report of the crash at the Pentagon was broadcast at about 9:42 a.m. Eastern Time on CNN. It made sense that a national network would have this information first since they have more resources in the nation’s capital than perhaps a local station would. But it was initially described as more of an “incident” than anything specific. This was the first time the network cut away from images out of New York and the World Trade Center to show live pictures from Washington D.C. CNN’s Aaron Brown began...
talking to Chris Plante, a correspondent in Washington, on the phone. Plante described what he saw as a “plume of smoke...billowing into the sky hundreds of yards high.” Brown then cut off Plante in the middle of his report on the Pentagon fire to disseminate further information about ordered evacuations at the Pentagon and White House. Greta van Susteren was the next person to report live from the nation’s capital. She said she wasn’t sure if it was a bomb or a plane crash that she had heard, but that she was witnessing a “terrific fire” near the site of the Pentagon. CNN’s John King, at 9:53 a.m. Eastern, officially confirmed over the phone that it was indeed a plane that had gone down and plummeted into the Pentagon in Washington.[15]

There were also reports that a helicopter rather than a plane had struck the Pentagon and caused the fire. On CBS, Dan Rather said, “There are other, and I repeat totally unconfirmed reports, at the Pentagon that it wasn’t a plane that went into the Pentagon but a helicopter.” Rather went on to say that a helicopter and a plane may have both hit the building. He emphasized the term “unconfirmed” but still put this information out there as a helicopter’s involvement was a possibility. “Fact: something started a fire with some explosion at the Pentagon not long after the two World Trade Centers were hit by separate aircrafts,” he said. It is noteworthy that he called it a “fact” that something did indeed strike the Pentagon. This made it clear that it was not a bomb or other explosive device inside the building that may have gone off to cause the explosion and resulting fire.[16]

Although there were still few details of the Pentagon crash early on, it seemed as if CNN did not portray that crash as significant initially as much as it did with the first two World Trade Center crashes. Perhaps this is because of how densely populated
Lower Manhattan is compared to a relatively smaller amount of people in and around the Pentagon in the morning hours of the day. Or it could have simply been because of the fact that the third crash came after the first two, so it was not quite as shocking as the very first one in New York was.

More confusion also occurred following the third plane crash in Washington. Jamie McIntyre, a CNN correspondent who was working inside the Pentagon, received messages on his computer, asking, “Are you all right?” and “Is everything okay?” McIntyre was initially puzzled by the meaning of the messages because he did not even realize the building had been hit. He soon learned about the crash from his producer and also heard an announcement for everyone to evacuate the facility. This underscores the fact that many people were unaware that something had taken place there until hearing about it from a news source. Similarly, there were reports that people in the South Tower of the trade centers were did not know that the first plane had crashed into the North Tower just minutes earlier.

**IV. Fourth Plane Crash – Shanksville, Pennsylvania**

The fourth and final plane crashed into a rural field in Pennsylvania southeast of the Pittsburgh area at 10:03 a.m. Nobody was sure that this was the final crash of the attacks, but the fact that the jet did not strike any significant structures and instead was taken down – presumably away from its intended target – said something important about the sequence of attacks and the possible end to them nearing. Still it was difficult for journalists to make this assertion, even though the three previous jets struck the terrorists’ desired targets, yet this one did not go down in an urban area.
It took over 30 minutes for any major network to officially report on this crash. The primary reason for this delay in getting the information out is because the crash site was away from where any news organizations were based. At 10:37 a.m., CNN correspondent Aaron Brown, covering the collapse of the World Trade Center towers, announced, "We are getting reports and we are getting lots of reports and we want to be careful to tell you when we have confirmed them and not, but we have a report that a 747 is down in Pennsylvania, and that remains unconfirmed at this point."[18] He followed that up at 10:45 a.m. by reporting that, "We have a report now that a large plane crashed this morning, north of the Somerset County Airport, which is in western Pennsylvania, not too terribly far from Pittsburgh, about 80 miles or so, a Boeing 767 jet. Don't know whose airline it was, whose airplane it was, and we don't have any details beyond that which I have just given you." While giving as many details as possible on Flight 93, he erroneously reported that a second hijacked plane was heading for the Pentagon following the first crash at that site about an hour prior to this.[19]

There were two pieces of misinformation in this report. But Brown was very cautious in reporting the crash by initially urging viewers to bear in mind that the network was getting "lots of reports" and not all were necessarily accurate. Its producers had to sort through these reports to determine which ones were most important and accurate and which to hold off on reporting. This involved making some tough judgment calls – always a challenge when covering breaking news. Brown stated that the fourth plane was a 747 when it was actually a 767. He also mentioned the possibility of a second plane headed for the Pentagon, which turned out to be untrue. The argument could be made that this added fuel to an already spectacular blaze of fear from that morning. But
these particular nuggets of news were presumably backed up by at least one reliable source; otherwise, CNN likely would not have reported the rumor of the second plane.

CNN did not show pictures from the Shanksville crash site until about 12:45 p.m. They continued coverage of the first three crashes prior to this. Anchor Judy Woodruff was interviewing Sen. John McCain about the morning's events when she cut into the interview.

"I'm going to interrupt you Senator McCain," Woodruff said. "These are the first pictures we have in. This is from Somerset County, Pennsylvania...where the United Airline flight, I believe it is 176, went down. I'm sorry, I'm correcting, United Airlines 93; this was a Boeing 757 bound from Newark, New Jersey to San Francisco. It crashed in Somerset County, Pennsylvania...we are told about 80 miles outside of Pittsburgh in western Pennsylvania. It is not known how many passengers or crew were onboard, although initial reports indicated no survivors."

Just as other anchors and reporters made mistakes due to confusion, Woodruff initially said that this flight was United Airlines Flight 176; it was actually United Airlines Flight 93, which she corrected almost immediately. She confused it with Flight 175, which hit the South Tower of the World Trade Center. Also, just as the networks utilized resources from local stations for their coverage, CNN received these pictures from WTAJ in Pittsburgh. The reliance on local news organizations was essential, and this instance exemplified that because of where the crash site was.

Hours after the plane went down, Fox News Channel ran an interview with a photographer from the Fox affiliate in Pittsburgh. "There was nothing that you could distinguish that a plane had crashed there...it was absolutely quiet, it was actually very
quiet. You couldn’t see anything.” As previously stated about the earlier crashes, this one was similar in that it almost occurred silently as if a tree had fallen in a forest and nobody was around to hear it. This was a reason for a fact gap - a delay in time to get this information out because of how and where the crash took place.

V. South World Trade Center Tower Collapses

The South Tower was the first to go down, but it was actually the second building struck. It burned for 56 minutes and then began to collapse at 9:59 a.m. This is the point in time widely viewed as the time that most Americans first heard about on the radio or saw live on television. It was just over an hour before the first plane crash. To watch a skyscraper in the middle of Manhattan fall to the ground was almost as dramatic as seeing the second plane collide with the tower on live television.

Due to the massive size of the two buildings and the billowing smoke all around, it was difficult for the media to determine exactly when the towers officially collapsed. Between 10:03 and 10:06 a.m., many media outlets stated that this tower had collapsed, even though it was a few minutes earlier. As the tower crumbled to the ground, Aaron Brown of CNN interrupted Jamie McIntyre, who was giving details about the crash at the Pentagon. Brown told him, “I need you to stop.” He then described the collapsing and exploding skyscraper and went on to say, “That is as frightening a scene as you’ll ever see.” Brown also noted that he wasn’t sure whether it was the plane’s collision with the tower that caused it to explode and ultimately collapse, or if something else happened in addition to the plane crash that helped to perpetuate its fairly quick downfall because it
took less than an hour for the tower to go down. Brown was just starting out at CNN at the time, and the 9/11 coverage was one of his first assignments for the network.

On NBC, Tom Brokaw was anchoring the coverage with Matt Lauer and Katie Couric. Lauer interrupted the conversation the three were having and said, “Let’s go back…we just saw a live picture of what seemed to be a portion of the building falling away from the World Trade Center. Something dramatic…something major just happened at that building.” They then replayed the tape that showed a section of the tower coming off. Couric chimed in with, “One can only hope that the area has been evacuated.” Like Aaron Brown on CNN, Lauer also speculated that something may have contributed to this further structural damage after the plane hit the building. Couric then said, “These pictures are beyond belief,” demonstrating the sheer disbelief among the journalists, in addition to everyone watching the news coverage that morning.24

VI. North World Trade Center Tower Collapses

The North Tower collapsed at 10:28 a.m. after having burned for about 102 minutes. There are several factors as to the reason this tower took longer to burn, most notably where the plane hit compared to the plane that struck the South Tower. It was the first structure to be hit in the string of the four plane hijackings.

The collapse of this tower was also shown live on television. This essentially marked the end of the major drama for the day, although a smaller adjacent building, known as the 7 World Trade Center, would fall later in the afternoon as a result of the destruction at the site of the twin towers.
CNN showed live footage from WNYW-TV of the North Tower's demise. Aaron Brown was narrating the pictures being shown on the screen. When he realized that the second tower was falling, he said, "Good Lord. There are no words.... This is just a horrific scene and a horrific moment." Television journalists are usually quite verbose and are, at the very least, able to describe and talk through certain events while live on camera. So for a journalist of Brown's caliber to be at a loss for words, the scale of the event he was covering must have been astonishing and incomparable to any other story he had covered in his career. This was obviously the case for what happened on September 11.

On Fox News Channel, the network was showing live footage of the twin towers courtesy of WCBS-TV in New York. As the second tower fell apart, the lone anchor of Fox's coverage simply said, "America, offer a prayer." This was preceded and followed by several seconds of silence as the live footage showed the second tower going down and the immense plume of smoke and utter devastation that engulfed the area. The anchor then went to Brian Wilson on the phone, a reporter who was in Washington. Wilson had noticeable panic in his voice. He stated that he had heard from local authorities that another plane was headed for the nation's capital following the first one that struck the Pentagon. Both the White House and Capitol building had been evacuated. "The reliability of that information I cannot tell you, but that's what police have told us," Wilson said, showing that he was simply passing information along but was unsure of its accuracy. Another male anchor came on after Wilson's report and said, "I think we must say a prayer and our heart certainly goes out to everyone who is there. I think it's important to say a prayer and remember these people and hope that God gives them his
grace.” This was another use of the word “prayer” during the coverage. Also, referencing God was a bit unique compared to some of the other networks. Fox cameras then cut to a shot of the Statue of Liberty, which the anchors pointed out was still standing in spite of the tragic events. One of their reporters on the street, David Lee Miller, then came on the phone and described the chaos and intense smoke around him. “Right now, there is nothing here but shock on the lower streets of Manhattan,” Miller said. Perhaps Fox News’ coverage was a bit more sentimental and reflective on the situation than some of the other networks.[26]

On New York’s WNYW-TV, several anchors were recapping the situation with the twin towers when all of a sudden, the second tower began to collapse. A male anchor interrupted two females who were talking and said, “Oh my goodness, look at the screen.” A gasp among everyone in the studio was then heard. “Oh my God,” the male anchor said. “Both towers down,” a female anchor said. “Oh my God,” the male repeats. The female then said, “I hope they evacuated everybody out of that area because…” Her voice trailed off and viewers could hear her tear up. She then went silent for a few seconds, then went on to say, “One of the great symbols of New York, if not this country, if not the world – forever erased from our memory.” Moments later, she asked, “What do we do now?” This showed another rare instance of a journalist in pure disbelief literally asking her co-anchors – and perhaps the viewers – what would come next. It seemed to be a rhetorical question at first, but it was almost as if she was hoping for a real answer. “I am very, very angry by this,” she said, showing more of her opinion and emotion on-air. But these thoughts were likely going through the minds of most Americans. She just had access to a microphone and was on a TV station and spoke her mind. She continued
on with seemingly rhetorical questions, asking "Where do we go from here? What should we do?" This coverage represented more of a local view on the horrific situation for New Yorkers who were so familiar with the World Trade Center and what it really represented to not only the state but also the nation.

**General Analysis of Entire Coverage**

The reason for so many different interpretations and perspectives of what initially happened on the morning of September 11, 2001 is simple: there were so many different media outlets covering the story at the same time. Some had access to more resources than others, and some were located closer to the scenes of the three different crash sites, which gave them a slight advantage in bringing pictures to Americans watching on television and having reporters in the area to obtain first-hand information.

When the first plane hit, media outlets had to judge for themselves what really happened based on pictures of the World Trade Center site. This is because no video of the first crash was available until days later. Very early reports on TV stations were broadcast right before any official news was released from the government and the Associated Press. So producers had to look at the pictures from the scene and use eyewitness accounts in order to decide how to have their reporters best describe the story as it unfolded. Smoke poured out of the North Tower, but this quickly made it difficult to tell which tower the first plane hit because the atmosphere around the towers had become so hazy. Smoke also indicated a fire — a term most stations went with at first. In addition, there appeared to be a hole of significant size in the side of the tower. This could be interpreted as something exploding from within the building or something hitting it from
the outside that created the hole. Since most people were not watching the scene via a camera when the first plane struck the North Tower, it was difficult to tell that a plane was actually involved because the plane’s impact obviously caused it to fall apart and brought significant debris to the ground. The amount of smoke only made matters worse in terms of being able to see what was actually behind all the haze in the air. This made the accounts of eyewitnesses so much more important as they were the only ones who saw and heard what happened live.

A CNN anchor interviewed an expert and former National Transportation Safety Board member after the first two impacts. He said there was no way the crashes could have been an accident and pointed to the great visibility in the sky that particular morning. If it had been accidental, there likely would have been something in the atmosphere to cause problems with navigation.[15] This claim of it being a deliberate act went against what some of the initial eyewitnesses and anchors had just speculated on, showing the back-and-forth nature of opinions that were coming out at the time.

Once it was determined that commercial airliners had hit the twin towers, most media outlets logically determined that foul play – and perhaps terrorism – was involved. However, there was little knowledge at first about who, specifically, was responsible for what happened. CNN anchor Daryn Kagan reported at 9:18 a.m. a blurb from the AP wire. “The FBI in Washington is investigating reports that these two plane crashes (are) the result of foul play,” Kagan said. “There is a report here by the Associated Press of a possible plane hijacking.”[28] The fact that CNN did not mention or allude to this possibility until an official source such as the AP reported it showed that the network was extra cautious in its reporting. Although its anchors insinuated that it was something
deliberate based on common sense and interpretation, they did not make an official determination for viewers until it was safe to do so.

Just a minute before Kagan’s report on CNN, CBS News correspondent Jim Stewart was the first to mention Osama bin Laden by name at about 9:17 a.m. Eastern as a possible perpetrator of the attacks from what he had learned through the federal government’s intelligence community. They specifically believe this is the work of Osama bin Laden,” Stewart later said, referring to the FBI. This shows how quickly speculation can travel and how fast the media was to potentially clarify who was behind the attacks. It also demonstrated that the network was willing to run the risk of putting this speculation out there, even though it was done right in the midst of the attacks and was stated well before the final two planes had crashed in Washington D.C. and Pennsylvania. Fortunately for CBS News, they were accurate in the assumption that bin Laden was behind the plot as this information would be confirmed in the days following the hijackings.

According to a Pew Research Center poll, about 90 percent of Americans first learned of the attacks from television coverage. Roughly 53 percent of TV viewers got their news from cable, and CNN was the main choice for coverage among those viewers. Cable television was very mainstream and accessible at this time, and based on this information, CNN has generally been considered a leader in reporting news and the popular choice for news viewing. Because of this network’s reputation – and it was seen to be more cautious in its coverage of 9/11 – viewers likely trusted its journalistic presentation and integrity on this day. But the fact that so many Americans got their news about these events from television also indicates something surprising about the Internet.
If only 10 percent of Americans found out about 9/11 through other media outlets, including radio, news of this event on the Internet was consumed by less than 10 percent of Americans – a seemingly low number since the Internet had developed into a fairly large news source by 2001. However, taking into account that many Americans were asleep or in transit at the time of the attacks puts the numbers into perspective.

Letting your opinion be known in a news report is one of the worst journalistic crimes a hard news reporter could commit in his or her job. But this standard seemed to be suspended for some time on September 11 when broadcast journalists reported on what they saw. Some anchors, particularly those who were on the air in the first few hours of coverage, let their emotions and feelings spill out to viewers. This demonstrates the difficulty in covering a tragedy with great life loss and maintaining a straight face. Viewers saw journalists reacting more like human beings rather than detached observers of what was going on. Some were so in shock that they remained silent for a few moments. It should, however, be expected and completely acceptable for this to occur during such tremendous stress.

Viewers also started hearing more personal reactions to the attacks. While talking to a reporter, CNN studio anchor Judy Woodruff said, “Absolutely chilling to hear you say that, David, that there are people in these organizations—and we now know it—who could fly commercial jetliners to do what, these horrible, unspeakable acts that have been committed today in the United States.” When the first tower collapsed, Aaron Brown was quoted as saying, “Good Lord. There are no words....This is just a horrific scene and a horrific moment.”[25] For a journalist to be at a loss for words, the scale of the event he or she is covering must be astonishing.
The attacks were not only emotional for those with family and friends who were directly affected by them, but they also struck a chord with most Americans as the day’s events represented a direct attack on the freedoms that Americans enjoy. Some of this emotion showed with ABC’s Peter Jennings during the hours he spent on the air. In a rare instance from a TV journalist, Jennings, a 40-year veteran of his industry at the time, actually made a recommendation to viewers. Jennings said that any parents watching the coverage should call or talk to their children to make sure they understand what is going on. He hoped this would comfort them and ease some of their stress about the situation.

"We do not very often make recommendations for people’s behavior from this chair," Jennings said, "but as [ABC News correspondent] Lisa [Stark] was talking, I checked in with my children, and it--who were deeply stressed, as I think young people are across the United States. So, if you're a parent, you've got a kid” – he paused and seemed to get an awkward smile on his face – “in some other part of the country, call them up. Exchange observations.”[32]

Jennings’ suggestion to viewers was totally appropriate at the time. He was playing the role of a familiar voice trying to comfort Americans by encouraging families, in particular parents and their children, to get together or, at the very least, communicate with each other in the midst of this tragedy. Young people may not have been quite as familiar with the history of terrorism compared to adults, including the 1993 car bombing of the World Trade Center that resulted in a significantly less severe result. Islamic extremist terrorists were ultimately responsible for carrying out the devastation on 9/11, but this fascism had been around for decades prior to the attacks. This is just one reason why Jennings insinuated that young Americans were probably scared and perhaps more
confused about what was going on in their country that day than older Americans may have been. But it wasn’t just youngsters who needed comfort and support; it was difficult for people of all ages to understand why this had to happen out of the blue on a beautiful September morning. On the other hand, it was also an event that a certain generation of youngsters will remember experiencing for the rest of their lives, and Jennings reinforced this by trying to make that familial connection among viewers, in spite of the fact that journalists in most cases would never give themselves the responsibility of offering advice to their audience.

During its first 12 hours of reporting, one of the more significant elements of CNN’s coverage was its tendency to rely on government sources to make some sense out of the terrorist attacks for viewers. Eyewitnesses, reporters, and producers were the main people used to describe events and add more detail to the images of the burning and eventually collapsing towers. But CNN relied greatly on current and former government officials to interpret the day’s events and put what had happened into perspective along with predictions on what would happen as a result. The network did not seem to use as many eyewitnesses as other outlets to garner information as the day progressed. CNN’s judgment in selecting which individuals could add the most insightful commentary and who were readily available also demonstrated the network’s ease of access to high-ranking officials.

Also, CNN did not interview anyone with a political affiliation other than Republican or Democrat. They made one important point clear through their coverage: Americans had no choice but to fully support the president in his future decisions on battling terrorism and fighting back against the perpetrator of the attacks. In a few
instances, CNN was giving government officials a platform to send messages to other world leaders about what the government’s plans and intentions were following the attacks. They made it clear that the United States had full intentions of going to war, probably in Afghanistan, to fight back after what the terrorists did to America on September 11. [33]

In addition, CNN gave the perception that America had been unified by the terrorist attacks both politically and, more generally, as a nation. Democrats, including Senator Hillary Clinton, made statements on the network in support of President Bush. Most agreed that some form of military response was necessary to help protect the nation from enduring future terrorist attacks. In addition, claims that CNN tends to lean to the left of the political spectrum while Fox News Channel is more on the right nearly became irrelevant on this day. The United States of America was at the forefront, and this appeared to be a common theme across all networks. [15]

Breaking news is something TV networks deal with on a daily basis. With the advent of 24-hour cable news networks in the 1980s, a viewer can now turn on a television, watch it all day long, and learn about most news events shortly after they occur. The same held true for these networks’ coverage of the terrorism on 9/11. Networks were eager to put out as much new information as possible, and they wanted to do it before their competitors did, even in a crisis like this. Speed tends to step on the heels of accuracy in some of these situations, and this was exemplified with some of the reporting on this day. But the fact that every network had a camera showing the scene all day long, or received a live feed from a local station, almost made it easier to break news about the attacks since viewers were able to see the towers for themselves. The story was
essentially unfolding in front of viewers' eyes, and explaining what exactly was happening did not seem to be as important as getting information from sources to verbally report. This was because viewers could basically watch the story unfold for themselves.

Religion is always a touchy subject, especially when it is dealt with in the media. The attacks actually brought out some religiously based statements from members of the media, including CNN's Judy Woodruff. Later on in the coverage, Woodruff said, "We want to say God bless the souls of those who have lost their lives today or who are dying or are dying as we speak in hospitals and in places where they cannot be reached. I think that even those out there who may not believe that there is a God at a time like this, we all reach out for a higher being and we want to believe that there is someone who can bring us salvation."[15] It can be comforting for viewers to hear words like these when a large number of Americans have obviously lost their lives, but is it necessary to mention God’s name on a news broadcast? Some journalism experts could argue against this. Although she used the term “higher being” since she tried to insinuate that not everyone believes in God, Woodruff called out people “who may not believe that there is a God.” This may have taken it a step too far. People should be able to do what they feel most comfortable doing at a difficult time like this was for Americans. They should not, however, have to hear journalists talk about religion. Even though Woodruff tried to walk on thin ice in this situation and remain politically correct, her word choice was not the best and certainly unconventional for a journalist.

Generally, any form of a newscast – be it the 6:30 p.m. news on ABC or an hour-long block of programming on CNN – will include a variety of news stories that occur on
a certain day or within a few days. However, on September 11, 2001, the world for Americans essentially came to a halt, as exemplified by the media. There was very little, if any, other news reported that day, almost as if nothing else happened in the United States. The magnitude of the event did not stop everyone from living their lives. But in some ways, this is how many media outlets framed this particular day. Many producers deemed any other news as being irrelevant to even report. This is a further example of how journalism was different on 9/11. One main role of a journalist is to keep citizens informed and aware of local issues. Some local radio and TV stations tied the attacks to local residents, such as people with friends or family in and around where the planes struck or how certain events were cancelled because of what happened. But what if there were a major story in local area of the country that involved something that would affect people more in that area than the terrorist attacks’ effect? Would there be any way to get this information to a local audience in the midst of a crisis like the attacks? It would likely be overshadowed by the news of the tragedy, and most people may never hear about it.

Information from eyewitnesses can be extremely helpful to journalists. But sometimes it can convolute a story and make it more difficult to sift through everything and make sense of something this dramatic. Some of the eyewitnesses who were interviewed by TV stations, including WNYW in New York and CNN nationally, said they thought something had exploded inside the North Tower when the first jet hit it because windows were blown out and other debris was coming out of the tower. They described it as a “sonic boom” yet some did not even hear the sound of a jet in the area prior to the crash and only heard the impact. This seemed to contradict initial reports that
a plane had gone into the tower and led to more misinformation about what really happened. Another piece of information from eyewitnesses was that commercial planes rarely fly directly over Manhattan and the World Trade Center complex, so it was odd that a plane would have been in the vicinity unless something was wrong. Once journalists digested this information and applied it to official reports, they were able to make more accurate determinations based on both eyewitness accounts and official statements.

Another unique aspect of the initial breaking news coverage was that the TV stations had live footage from the towers on the screen at all times. Rarely did viewers actually see the anchors’ faces who were talking over the live video. This emphasized the visual aspect of the news scene because of how dramatic the pictures were of smoke billowing out of the massive towers in a highly populated area of New York. This news presentation hindered the connection between the anchor and the viewer. But it signified the importance of the visual aspects of this particular news story, and during the breaking news coverage, seeing pictures of the story itself was far more important than seeing the face of an anchor or reporter. This gradually changed as the day dragged on. Some of the veteran anchors, including Peter Jennings of ABC News and Dan Rather of CBS News, would later appear on camera to viewers, offering more of a connection to them by getting some face time. However, this primarily took place after the morning chaos had calmed down a bit. This allowed the anchors to speak directly to Americans and offer some words of comfort and encouragement that were primarily reserved for these news veterans. In addition, anchors like Jennings and Rather were so recognized because of their long careers in television that it was only appropriate for them – as opposed to
lesser-known journalists—to really connect with viewers. They also began to offer more general analysis of how Americans would be affected by the day’s events.

**Keywords and Themes**

Perhaps one of the more intriguing aspects of the media’s reporting was the verbiage that anchors used in describing the attacks. The most common keywords in the initial coverage included “horrible,” “horror,” “horrific,” “horrendous,” “disturbing,” “unbelievable,” “extraordinary,” and “terrible.” One could argue that some of these terms had some opinion or subjectivity behind them, although journalists called it like they saw it, which is generally an acceptable method to follow in the industry. The general consensus was that these attacks were of historical significance and put a black eye on American history. The variety of words also revealed how many different ways the events could be reported. Even though “horrible” and “terrible” effectively mean the same thing, one anchor may have used one word while another used the other term. These descriptors appeared on the front pages of newspapers around the country the following morning, and each newspaper used a slightly different headline.

After President Bush’s 9:30 a.m. address to the nation confirming that what had occurred was indeed a terrorist attack, other keywords came into play among journalists. On CNN, anchors began referring to the United States more frequently as “America” instead of “the U.S.” or “the United States.” In a broad sense, the word “America” could refer to North and South Americas along with the countries in Central America. Journalists also frequently used the word “war,” which was heard 234 times in 12 hours. Also, the terms “cowards” and “madmen” were used to describe the terrorists, and there
were numerous references to “God” and the need to “pray” or for “prayer.” These three words with a religious connotation were mentioned 61 times in the first few hours of CNN coverage, most often by journalists and reporters. Anchors used words like “freedom,” “justice,” and “liberty” as well to reinforce the widely held ideals of Americans on such a tragic day for the nation.\[35\]

Journalists attempted to put the true magnitude of this day into perspective, and it was difficult to do so at times. CNN analyst Jeff Greenfield remarked, “Whoever is behind this, this is of a dimension that literally dwarfs even fantasy.” Comparing the events to a “fantasy” was an excellent way of saying that there was almost no way to describe what had happened – as if it was like a horror movie. Judy Woodruff said several times during the day, “I have to say in my 30 years as a journalist I have never seen anything like this. Never covered a story of the dimensions of this.” For a journalist of her caliber, mentioning that this story was incomparable to her three-decade career in news also provided context to how significant the attacks were when compared to other news events.\[36\]

The word “attack” was perhaps the most-used term during the initial coverage of the hijackings. Once the media got beyond the fact that the crashes were not a mere accident, this term became synonymous with what had happened that morning. But it was more than just an “attack” on buildings. It was an attack on the freedoms of Americans, and journalists attempted to frame this widely held sentiment.

While being interviewed about his opinion on the morning’s events, U.S. Senator John McCain of Arizona said, “This is obviously an act of war.” Following McCain’s comment, journalists incorporated the phrase “act of war” into the questions they asked
when interviewing sources. Around 2 p.m. Eastern, Judy Woodruff was interviewing U.S. Senator Christopher Dodd of Connecticut. Dodd said, "In a day like this, which rivals if not exceeds the attack on Pearl Harbor almost 60 years ago...we stand totally united behind our president and our government." Once Dodd made the Pearl Harbor analogy, journalists took this into account and also used it in the questions they asked other sources throughout the day. A local New York City journalist interviewing an eyewitness to the collapse said, "A lot of people equated this to something like Pearl Harbor. You were there [today]. Nothing has ever happened like this." Sources also used it to underscore the "war" mantra. James Kallstrom, a former FBI assistant director, said, "I think [this is] clearly an act of war...it’s a different time, but it’s everything that Pearl Harbor was and more." Former Secretary of Defense Lawrence Eagleburger told CNN, "What you do is you strike at them militarily. I mean, I know this is going to sound awful, but there is only one way to begin to deal with people like this, and that is you have to kill some of them even if they are not immediately directly involved in this thing." CNN correspondent David Ensor said, "There’s a certain amount of black humor also now setting in...when I asked [intelligence officials] whether there were considerations being given to some sort of retaliation against targets in Afghanistan, one official said, "I wouldn’t be planning your vacation there if I were you." Each of these quotes from various sources exemplifies the mindset they had - to fight back and go to war - even before the attacks had been put into a proper perspective.

The media also played a part in how the attacks were remembered. For example, it was a member of the media who first associated the term “ground zero” to the site of where the World Trade Center towers once stood. The media first used the term as early
at 7:47 p.m. Eastern on the evening of September 11. CBS News reporter Jim Axelrod said, “Less than four miles behind me is where the Twin Towers stood this morning. But not tonight. Ground Zero, as it's being described, in today's terrorist attacks that have sent aftershocks rippling across the country.”[38] Although the term “ground zero” could be used to describe any location of significance, it still shows how the media attached this term to 9/11 and is something by which Americans will remember the location of the twin towers because of the media’s involvement in covering the story.

8. Challenges in Covering the Attacks

The attacks were obviously a major challenge to cover because of the smoke in the air and poor visibility in the area of the twin towers. Some journalists could hardly find their way around and became disoriented, making it difficult to move about on the scene and even distinguish left from right. Rehema Ellis, a correspondent for NBC News, said she could hardly breathe when she arrived on the scene. She retrieved a rag from a nearby utility truck and wrapped it around her face, which helped ease her breathing. She was also disoriented and could hardly find her way around when she and a producer ventured into the chaos around the towers. Ellis did not even recognize the Brooklyn Bridge in front of her since it was shut down and free of cars for the first time she could ever remember.[39]

Further emphasizing how difficult it was for some journalists to cover the story, David Mattingly, a CNN correspondent, was on vacation about two hours from where the fourth plane went down in Pennsylvania. He nixed his vacation plans when he found out about the crash, left where he was staying, and went out to cover the story for CNN. But
his wife noticed how he was shaking when he left her that morning. Mattingly said he had had “death threats and close scrapes with bullets, sharks, lions, and drug traffickers” as a reporter in the past. He said he had “always been okay” dealing with these forms of adversity. But for the first time in his 20-year journalism career, he said he was not okay. This story would be the most challenging one he would ever cover, he said. This was likely something that all journalists felt on September 11 because of how traumatic the situation was for Americans, including journalists, to really grasp and understand. It was a nightmare that was not a dream but a reality that everyone had to face.

Covering a story generally involves being on the scene to get the best details possible. Some reporters were actually told to leave the scene of the story on this day, and police officers literally pushed people out of the streets, including several reporters. They wanted them to get away from the chaos of the burning towers for obvious safety reasons. But this hindered their ability to fully report on the story. Although it was difficult for reporters to talk to fleeing people and officials in the streets, the need to have journalists in the area for reporting purposes still remained. As previously mentioned, this dimension could be added to a long list of reasons why journalism was so different on this unforgettable day in America.

Although technology helped in the reporting process, there were issues with it that hampered reporters’ abilities. Some of the eyewitnesses and street reporters who called into TV stations dropped their cell lines, and some had trouble hearing the anchors. This mainly occurred because networks like CNN were trying to get people on the air as soon as possible. They had to endure some technical difficulties in the process, but it seemed to be worth it. There were also major issues with cellular communication in and around
Manhattan as people made calls to loved ones in the area to ensure their safety. These calls tied up lines that could have been used by journalists who were reporting on the scene. This was simply another challenge reporters faced. Many people were cut off from their cell phones due to lines dropping. Others had to be interrupted by the anchor and taken off the air in favor of a different eyewitness or reporter, depending on what was happening at each exact moment. These situations showcased how quickly news can travel and the news judgment of various networks in terms of what is most important to get to the viewers in the fastest possible time.

Balancing news from two different locations, but ironically both on a similar story, quickly became an obligation for news organizations when the third plane crashed in Washington D.C. at the Pentagon. CNN would soon show a splitscreen of two images— one coming from the site of the twin towers on the left side of the screen paired with pictures from the Pentagon on the right side of the screen. It was necessary to show both shots as they were related to the entire story of that morning—a coordinated terrorist attack that had direct implications on more than one location in the country. Reporting on the Pennsylvania crash added a further obligation to journalists since this was also a major piece of the complicated puzzle that was 9/11.

Missteps in Coverage

During the coverage, there were numerous times that information was erroneously reported. There were several references to the previous World Trade Center bombing eight years before the 2001 attacks. Leon Harris, an anchor from CNN, mistakenly said the bombing was in 1996, when it actually occurred in 1993. It was obvious he was going
on memory and did not have this information officially given to him. But it was also ironic that CNN did not have this fact readily available even though it was an event that had taken place years prior to the hijacking. Veteran anchor Aaron Brown would correct this information about 10 minutes later when he took over anchoring duties, stating that the bombing occurred in February of 1993 – just a few weeks after President Bill Clinton took office.[15]

On CBS at about 10:25 a.m., Dan Rather reported that a car bomb had been detonated at the U.S. State Department's headquarters in Washington, D.C. "Now a car bomb has exploded outside the State Department in Washington," he said. "No further details available on that." Rather then added, "It may not be over yet. Authorities say there were enough explosives in the truck to bring down the bridge" – referring to a local bridge in the area. He finally backtracked and stated that local police in New York had no information regarding this; it was merely information from the State Department with no confirmation from other sources. Rather later prefaced the car bomb report with an honest admission. He said, "I repeat for emphasis, we'd rather be last [to report something] than be wrong, but in reporting of this kind, we're bound to make some mistakes." It was a good thing he made this statement, but everything else showed a lack of truly caring to get things right on his part, which was noteworthy for an anchor in Rather's chair.[41]

Further mistakes in reporting occurred on CNN and on the Associated Press wire. Soon after reporting on the Pentagon crash, CNN and other media outlets briefly reported that a fire had broken out at the Washington Mall – an open-air national park in the downtown part of the city.[42] Another report went out on the AP wire that claimed Delta Flight 1989 – a plane in close proximity to Flight 93 – had been hijacked.[43] This report
was false as well. The fact that the AP went so far to list a specific airline obviously meant that they had a credible source for this particular piece of news. And the AP is widely considered the standard for breaking news. But it turned out to be wrong information and did not receive significant play from any other major outlets after this.

Conclusions about the Coverage

There are notable differences among how the various television networks and local stations framed the morning of September 11, 2001. CNN’s coverage, in general, was more cautious. Its anchors and producers did not go on information unless they had substantial confirmation from another reliable source, such as the AP wire, as exemplified in many instances. NBC News seemed to echo CNN’s coverage. Their anchors did not react extremely emotionally, and they did not take any major risks in reporting inaccuracies.

CBS News was a bit more risky in its presentation of the attacks. The fact that one of its reporters named bin Laden as the culprit in the midst of the attacks was a precarious claim to make at that moment. But this turned out to be true. Dan Rather also reported numerous times about a car bomb exploding, which turned out to be false. His emphasis of the erroneous report made it stand out in the network’s coverage.

The local stations, such as WNYW-TV in New York City, tended to have more emotional reactions to the attacks. Some anchors could be heard gasping and tearing up on the air. The primary reason for this is likely because the story hit so close to home for
them and their viewers. It was as if the twin towers had fallen right in their backyard and they had lost a major part of their state that represented so much. Perhaps the attacks had the biggest effect on New Yorkers in general, and this sentiment came through with the area’s local TV coverage on that day.

With the advent of new media in the past 20 years or so, there are countless options for people to consume news about any story. The fact that the 9/11 attacks had such a significant impact on the United States made the story something that media outlets at all levels essentially were required to cover. What this provided was a potpourri of angles, dimensions, and sides to the story. In essence, if the attacks had occurred years earlier when the media landscape was so much different, the story may have been framed very differently due to the fewer outlets for news that existed back then. But as human beings, everyone reacts somewhat differently to the same situation. This is why the media coverage was so diverse and unique on this particular day in American history.
## ATTACK ON THE U.S.

### HOW THE MORNING UNFOLDED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Airlines</th>
<th>Flight</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Passengers</th>
<th>Departure</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Destination</th>
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<th>Collapse Time</th>
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<td>Boeing 767</td>
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<td>10:05 a.m.</td>
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<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>Aircraft is crashed southeast</td>
<td>10:10 a.m.</td>
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Source: september11timeline.com

*Note: Impact and collapse times can vary slightly depending on each media outlet’s reporting.*
References


