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News as Spectacle: The Political Economy and Aesthetics of 24/7 News

James Compton

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On the surface, it would appear that large-scale media spectacles based on celebrities, such as the Monica Lewinsky scandal or the mourning of Princess Diana, have little in common with the 1991 Gulf War or the 2001 September 11th terrorist attacks in the United States. The former are easily dismissed as tabloid excess, while the latter constitute what journalists like to call hard news stories *par excellence*. It doesn't get more serious than war and terror. Media coverage of illicit sex and tabloid tragedy are widely regarded as the nadir of professional journalism. War and the threat of terror on the other hand, provide the news media with opportunities to redeem themselves and reproduce the legitimising narrative of independent truth-seekers. I wish to complicate this separation. I argue, instead, that the reporting of hard news and the tabloid variety share a commonality: both are constitutive of, and are constructed by, the economic competition among 24-hour news organizations, which include both broadcast and online organizations.

My focus is the economic, social and cultural contexts in which 24-hour cable and online journalism operate, and the practical uses to which stories are put. I view media events, such as the Gulf War, the Monica Lewinsky scandal, and the terrorist attacks of September 11th,

as entry points into a much larger discussion about the underlying promotional logic that increasingly structures practices of capital accumulation and the activity of journalists. Specifically, I argue that cultural texts stemming from media events are promotional commodities which have been aestheticized through marketing, advertising, and dramatic storytelling.

It is true that these cultural texts can be appropriated by individuals and social groups who may use them to forward their own interests. And, as is the case with September 11, 2001, these stories may be of a very serious nature. However, the key point I develop is that these narratives and the social identities they represent—mediated through a particular set of market transactions—have become *constitutive* of economic competition and rational organization. That is to say, they have become objects of rational and strategic action by commercial and political interests. It is in this sense that media spectacles become reified and susceptible to forms of domination.

Minimizing Risks to Capital Accumulation

Converged or integrated multi-media newsrooms and Web sites extend the successful business model adopted first by 24-hour cable channel CNN in which risks of capital accumulation are minimized through the re-purposing of information and resources among partnered or promotionally integrated networks. It was CNN that first proved that a low-budget integrated system of news production can make a profit in a highly competitive news environment characterised by economic uncertainty and fragmented audiences.

CNN owner Ted Turner poured more than \$70 million (U.S.) into the network until the mid 1980s. By then CNN's ability to spread its fixed costs across multiple broadcast platforms while simultaneously expanding its audience began to pay off. "Cable," as Don Flournoy and Robert Stewart argue, "changed the formula for making money in broadcasting."¹ The number of people watching any single CNN program was dwarfed by the audience for the nightly newscasts of the big-three networks. However, "the cumulative effect of small but multiple (and 24-hour) revenue streams could still generate operating profits."² Plus, CNN was able to collect individual subscriber fees – a reliable second revenue stream. In 1985, the same year CNN International was launched, Turner's experiment in

around-the-clock news started making money. CNN continued to grow. Today, the CNN News Group stretches over 12 networks: six cable networks, three out-of-house private networks, including CNN Airport Network, two radio networks, four Web sites, and CNN Newsource, a syndicated news service.

Richard Parker argues that from the beginning, the CNN strategy was predicated on the integration of “three simple rules: computerize, economize, and piggyback.”³ CNN “took advantage of the latest computer and satellite technology that would allow the company to integrate newswires, the assignment desk, producers, graphics rundowns, tape lists, and anchor scripts.” CNN became, says Parker, “television’s first truly electronic newsroom.” This kind of integration is now standard for all newsrooms at prominent media organizations.

Ted Turner also insisted that CNN be a strictly non-union workplace. This policy saved the company millions of dollars. Unlike the major U.S. networks, CNN did not have work rules restricting what jobs personnel could do. The extremely flexible working conditions meant that CNN staff could write stories, produce programs, and operate camera equipment, while at the same time working longer hours and being paid much less than their network colleagues. These efficiencies meant that CNN could produce its 24-hour news programming for close to “one third of the budget required by the network news programmes.”⁴ Parker argues the cost efficiencies realized by CNN further contributed to the layoffs which swept the newsrooms of the U.S. networks in the 1980s.⁵ CNN’s labour policy can also be held responsible for the initially high number of mistakes made by its inexperienced staff, many of whom were fresh out of college and willing to work cheap.

Finally, CNN saved enormous sums of money by “piggybacking.” Instead of initially establishing the same number of foreign bureaus as the networks, CNN decided to *re-use* or *re-purpose* material supplied by foreign broadcasters—saving millions. As part of this strategy, CNN created *World Report*, a program that broadcasts stories supplied by foreign broadcasters. What makes the program unique is that stories run un-edited by CNN staff. The program is cited by both CNN publicists and Flournoy and Stewart as an example of CNN’s commitment to providing a broad diversity of opinions from around the globe. But there is no hiding the fact that it

was part of a smart business strategy. The global market for goods and services was growing during the 1980s. The European Union was forging a large integrated economy that rivalled the United States in size, while in Asia, countries such as India were seeing their middle class expand (estimated today at between 200 and 250 million). Increasingly, Trans National Corporations (TNCs) wanted to “skim the cream” from these countries by targeting their affluent English-speaking elites.⁶ As a result, advertisers were keen to reach and develop this burgeoning transnational clientele. Herman and McChesney cite data taken from Tunstall and Palmer which indicate between 1980 and 1987 advertising in Europe more than doubled.⁷ Growth in ad spending continued into the 1990s, spurred on by the creation of a single European market. In order to capitalize on the expanding global media market, Flournoy and Stewart suggest CNN “needed to build bridges to every country in the world to gain access to content and to market its products.” *World Report* was a useful calling card in this project.⁸

CNN was helping to pioneer one of the defining elements of the integrated news environment: the development of partnership or “co-op strategies.” This took the form of linking separate news organizations through news-footage sharing agreements, co-ownership, or through the integration of one company’s many subsidiaries. European broadcasters began co-producing entertainment programs as part of their response to the continuing fragmentation of audiences during the 1980s. The former state-owned broadcast monopolies faced competition from private broadcasters and they were being forced to privatize in an effort to attract advertising revenue. Moreover, the integration of the European economies under the European Union was well underway. When the costs of production could be shared by the subsidiaries of different broadcasters, often from different countries, the risks of production were greatly reduced.⁹ Improved economies of scale realized through co-operative agreements applied to news production as well. So, as part of its news-sharing strategy, CNN has struck partnerships with local broadcasters all over the world, such as Wharf Cable in Hong Kong and more recently TVI in India. By 1997, CNN’s vast satellite system “reached 210 countries and territories, with potential access to a half-billion people everyday.”¹⁰

The basic economics of the network television news business are fairly simple. Extremely high fixed costs are incurred by large-scale news organizations in producing their first newscast. Beyond that first program, however, additional programming can be produced at progressively lower incremental cost. CNN's great advantage, over other broadcast networks, has been that it can re-purpose its news-content over an array of integrated networks, thus reducing costs even further. "The key to survival and success," say Flournoy and Stewart, "is simple: take any given news item and air it again and again in different ways on each of the company's networks."¹¹ It is this *production imperative* that is at the heart of the intensity and scale of spectacular media events.

Put simply, per-unit costs of news production are significantly reduced as resources and stories are spread among CNN's integrated cross-media properties. And I would argue that the extension of these practices to integrated multi-media news operations, such as those operated by Tribune, further increase the likelihood that the news agenda will be dominated by spectacular media events. In fact, it is this production imperative that is at the heart of the intensity and scale of spectacular media events.

Spectacular Storytelling and Flexible Production

I view Big Media Events as hog-fuel for 24-hour news channels and web sites. In particular, media events of the historically specific variety under discussion are well suited to a global trend toward "high-volume flexible production systems" characterized by flexible forms of management, labour performance, and increased intensity in the speed of production and turnover time.¹² New technologies and forms of information processing, driven by the desire among competing organizations to increase profitability, as Castells goes on to elaborate, "act upon all domains of human activity, and make it possible to establish endless connections between different domains, as well as between elements and agents of such activities."¹³ With the addition of new media technologies, says Philip Graham, we have entered into a historically unprecedented phase of "hypercapitalism" characterized by "the almost immediate production, consumption, distribution and exchange of valued categories of thought and language—knowledge commodities—on a planet wide scale."¹⁴

According to David Harvey this “regime of flexible accumulation” has had a significant impact on popular culture.¹⁵ Flexible accumulation has contributed to a greater emphasis on the fleeting and the ephemeral, on fashion and lifestyle, and in turn, on the speedier production of cultural meanings attached to commodities. The need for faster turnover time in consumption, as argued by Harvey, “has led to a shift of emphasis from production of [durable] goods ... to the production of events (such as spectacles that have an almost instantaneous turnover time).”¹⁶ In Harvey’s view, new forms of spectacular promotion become a decisive element in the quest for increased capital accumulation. In other words, aesthetic production has become integrated into commodity production generally.

More worrisome, says Harvey, is that this flexible system of production carries with it a shift in the form of domination. Ownership and the “direct control over the means of production and wage labour” are not the principle means by which domination is enacted and secured. Instead, “What stands out,” according to Harvey,

is sheer money power as a means of domination.... Such a system of asymmetrical money relations [is predicated on] the need to mobilize cultural creativity and aesthetic ingenuity, not only in the production of a cultural artefact but also in its promotion, packaging, and transformation into some kind of successful spectacle.¹⁷

Spectacular stories are integral to the profitability of 24-hour news organizations. CNN, MSNBC, and the Fox News network survive on the timely arrival and speedy, efficient exploitation of large-scale media events. These news organizations need spectacular media events to survive. Spectacular stories and their personalities increasingly have become central to the business of journalism on three levels: they are transposable; they are efficient; and they become anchors for broader strategies of capital accumulation.

Transposable Stories

Spectacular stories and familiar character types are easily inserted into the news-flow because they utilize widely shared themes of everyday life: Diana the troubled princess; bad-girl skater Tonya

Harding; the younger “other” woman in Monica Lewinsky; the personification of good and evil in the characters of U.S. President George Bush Sr. and Jr., paired of course, with arch-enemy Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

Conversely, narratives which seek to explain complex social, cultural and economic phenomena demand much more from audiences. Given the relatively short length of most news pieces, audiences are required to fill in the blanks of most narratives; that is to say, readers must give meaning to the story by referring to their own store of cultural and social information, and their own horizon of interests. It is because these narratives are easily understood by diverse audiences that they can flow effortlessly back and forth through seemingly disparate cultural spheres and sometimes between real life and fiction. Consequently, the dramatic tension strived for in theatre can be applied to the production of spectacular media events.

Channel surfers could be forgiven the week of November 12, 2000 for thinking they were witnessing an adaptation of Luigi Pirandello’s play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* in which the traditional boundaries of real-life and drama become problematized and thrown into question.¹⁸ On November 15, 2000 George W. Bush interrupted prime-time programming to make a live televised statement in support of his efforts to end manual recounts of election ballots in Florida. The unusual break in network programming followed a similar address to the nation by Vice-President Al Gore earlier that evening. Both men were courting public opinion while their lawyers continued a prolonged legal dust-up following the inconclusive presidential election results—itsself a spectacular media event, minus any sex or death (the seduction of power and loss of a political life aside).

Bush’s televised address broke into the CBS mini-series “American Tragedy,” the story of the O.J. Simpson murder trial. One of the characters in that drama is Harvard Law professor Alan Dershowitz who advised Simpson’s defense team. Meanwhile, for those viewers flipping to the real-time presidential drama unfolding on the 24-hour cable networks, Dershowitz (the flesh-and-blood version) could be seen providing a strident argument defending demands by Democrats for ballot recounts in three Florida counties. Celebrity legal pundit Greta Van Susteren, who gained notoriety during the Simpson trial, was also back on CNN providing

commentary on the intricacies of civil procedures. “All that’s missing from the scene outside the Palm Beach County courthouse,” writes Caroline Baum, “is the Juice himself, driving in his White Bronco, and Monica Lewinsky’s first lawyer, William Ginsburg.”¹⁹ Three days later Will Ferrell of *Saturday Night Live* would satirize Bush’s performance by declaring in Bush-speak, “Tonight I am victoriant.”²⁰

New York Times writer Caryn James suggests the “duelling news conferences” which aired live throughout the week contributed to a surreal conflux of drama and politics. Commenting on the blurring of boundaries between news and entertainment James remarked,

Along the way, it often intruded on fictions that seemed more plausible than the reality being reported. The result is one large political conversation in which drama, comedy and news mingle freely on screen, informing and shaping the off-screen political reality.²¹

Big spectacular media events are “never-ending” recombinant stories. The seemingly timeless nature of the moral and ethical questions posed by these dramatized narratives, appear to give them the gloss of eternal or mythological status. Conversely, it is because these narratives involve interesting and existentially-troubled characters that they hold commercial value as human interest stories par excellence. What made the 2000 U.S. election dispute even more unique is that it actually involved a substantive political dispute—the outcome of a presidential election. The human interest qualities at the heart of spectacular stories help make these narratives transposable.

We saw this kind of framing in 1991 during the Gulf War, and it has reappeared following the tragic events of September 11, 2001 in New York and Washington. The Manichean logic of good versus evil quickly became the frame within which most mainstream news organizations structured their stories. “This will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil, but good will prevail,” President George W. Bush announced the day following the suicide attacks. He literally pronounced Osama bin Laden, the wealthy Saudi developer and leader of the Al Qaeda terrorist network, as the number-one suspect on America’s most-wanted list. He was, said Bush, mimicking the dialogue of cheap Hollywood westerns—“wanted dead or alive.”

The logo adopted by most American news organizations for this conflict “America Under Attack” eventually morphed into “America Strikes Back.” Various Americans were praised for their selfless rescue efforts, from New York’s fire and police officers to Mayor Rudolph Gulliani—hailed for his stoic leadership during a time of national crisis. They were offered as the nation’s heroes. As with the “War in the Gulf,” the episodic good-versus-evil framing of most mainstream news coverage fit well with President Bush’s almost daily reference to “evil doers.” It invited audience members to participate in a dramatic ritual in which they could show their support and grief for the families of the close to 3,000 people murdered in the suicide-hijacking attacks. It also allowed people to share very real and legitimate fears about their own personal security. Again, as in the “War in the Gulf,” the emotional intensity of the coverage enabled news organizations to aestheticize the war in a way that both encouraged audience involvement across gender, class and racial demographics and contributed to a steady stream of stories that meshed with conventional norms of storytelling.

The important point I want to make is that—as in the “War in the Gulf”—the emotional intensity of the coverage enables news organizations to aestheticize war, or the possibility of war, in a way that encourages audience involvement across gender, class and racial demographics; and contributes to a steady stream of stories that mesh with conventional norms of storytelling. Behind the vast majority of coverage lies the easily transposable and “episodic framing”²² of an emotional confrontation between good and evil, in which good will triumph. These stories resonate easily and powerfully across cultural, class and demographic boundaries. Whereas, narratives, which seek to explain complex social, cultural and economic phenomena, demand much more from audiences. Moreover, it is this quality of transposability that makes Monicagate and other stories like it, perfect hog-fuel for the integrated media spectacle; and the organizations best positioned to take advantage of these efficiencies are the 24-hour news channels.

Efficient Stories

The flexibility of these images and narratives allows for their efficient re-use or recombination in a variety of programs, talk shows, publications, and Web sites. At the level of production, this allows

for the increased efficiency of individual news workers and the entire system of newsgathering and dissemination. As previously mentioned, spectacular images and narratives can travel with little friction between different media and their various program formats. The flexibility of these images and narratives allows for their efficient re-use or recombination in a variety of programs, publications, and Web sites. Consequently, news staffs can handle a much higher volume of information than would otherwise be the case.

The production requirements of 24-hour news stations provide a good example. The all-news networks rely on spectacular stories to fuel their production. Spectacles such as Monica Lewinsky's tryst with President Clinton, the massacre at Columbine High School in Denver, or the war in Kosovo provide the raw material for continuous programming with the added benefit of increased efficiency and flexible use of network labour. Speaking in 1999, Jeff Zucker, the former executive producer of NBC's *Today* show, now President of Entertainment for NBC, explained how most foreign correspondents would "leave 90 per cent" of their material unused after filing for the nightly news and his own program. However, that situation has now changed with the former "surplus" information "re-purposed" into feeding programs on 24-hour cable networks, such as, MSNBC, CNBC, and the Internet.²³

In addition, increased labour flexibility is required from reporters who are expected to provide a steady stream of "live hits" during the course of the broadcast day. The *Tribune Co.* has been the leader in North America in extending this logic to the integration of its combined newspaper, broadcast and internet properties. In addition to their regular duties, scribes at the *Orlando Sentinel*, for example, routinely file live reports for the company's local 24-hour cable television station.

The live-televised explosion of the Challenger Space Shuttle may have marked the first time that CNN caught the attention of the major U.S. networks, but the defining moment for the network came during the 1991 Persian Gulf War. CNN's *Crisis in the Gulf*, as its coverage was labelled, gave the all-news-network the legitimacy, ratings and advertising revenue that it craved. On January 16, 1991 CNN caught all major news organizations off-guard when it broadcast live pictures announcing that the allied bombing of Baghdad had begun. During the *Crisis in the Gulf*, CNN's primetime rating was

five (2.8 million U.S. households), overtaking the big-three American networks. It was an unprecedented ratings peak for the network, which following the end of the conflict settled back into its regular pre-war audience of roughly 568,000 households.²⁴

The *Crisis in the Gulf* gave CNN the Big Story it needed to take full advantage of its unique ability to provide blanket 24-hour coverage of an event. If one dominant story could be used to fuel programming over CNN's 24-hour schedule, the efficiency gains would be enormous. The *Crisis in the Gulf* marked the moment when the "constant flow" of rolling-news made the big leagues.

Night after night, CNN, and the other networks as well, broadcast an incessant flow of pictures of troops, airplanes, ships, tanks and military equipment, with interview after interview of the troops and their military spokespeople. Footage of the U.S. military was frequently supplemented on CNN by footage from the British and other allies' military establishments, resulting in seemingly endless images of military hardware and personnel.²⁵

The big story of the Gulf War was tailor-made for CNN's need for endlessly repeatable and easily updated footage and storytelling. The 24-hour broadcast day was filled with the repetition of images of wholesome troops, Baghdad's surreal night-sky lit by anti-aircraft flashes and F-15E fighter jets thrusting-off navy aircraft carriers. Perhaps, the most memorable image left from the war is not the horror of dead bodies, but the antiseptic video-game briefings depicting the so-called "smart bombs" destroying their targets. These images were supplemented by seemingly endless discussion among military experts and journalists about the tactical aspects of the war. But behind the vast majority of the coverage was the easily transposable and "episodic framing" of an emotional confrontation between good and evil, personified in the characters of U.S. President George Bush and Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

Big media events are translated into "never-ending" stories that help focus and organize news coverage. This point is not lost on the top managers responsible for convergence strategies. For example, managers at Texas Cable News (TXCN) and (www.dallasnews.com) have said the "single-minded focus" and "urgency" which big stories provide, "help solidify the reporting and heighten cooperation."²⁶

Analysis stemming from the concept of flexible accumulation can help us explain the intricate ways in which spectacular cultural

products serve disparate interests in both the economic and social realms. The story of the NATO bombing of Kosovo in 1999 was a boon to Republican presidential hopefuls eager to gain name and face recognition. Many appeared as guest pundits on shows such as MSNBC/CNBC's *Hardball* providing the program with much needed high-profile experts while at the same time providing themselves with national exposure.²⁷ This confluence of interests provides an interesting example of what Andrew Wernick has called the "vortex of publicity."²⁸ Both the presidential hopefuls and the cable programs they appear on act as promotional signs for each other. The increased circulation of spectacular images about the war serves to raise the profile and value of both the networks and candidates. In the early days following the NATO bombings MSNBC's ratings were up 103 percent.

Finally, the flexible accumulation argument directs our attention to the financial and cultural capital required to participate in the spectacle. Republican presidential hopefuls can insert themselves into the circulation of images precisely because of their financial wealth and cultural capital. Peace activists who lack similar resources may find it more difficult to have their views broadcast.

Anchors of Broader Strategies of Capital Accumulation

The ability to "re-purpose" information content, in tandem with new technologies such as global satellites and the Internet, helps news organizations grow in ways previously not thought of. For example, 24-hour cable news networks such as CNN, Fox, MSNBC and CNBC are not viable ventures without the ability to re-purpose information. Spectacular stories are perfectly suited to this purpose. Media events, such as the Washington sniper of 2002 and the explosion of the Columbia space shuttle, provide 24/7 news organizations with their largest audiences; but their chief importance lies in how these aestheticized events provide fulcrum points that allow integrated media properties to profitably administer their promotional system on a global scale. As systems of production and consumption become more and more integrated audiences are divided into niches and shared among the various strands of the integrated system of production and distribution—between broadcast, print, and new media. The strategy is designed to *re-aggregate* audiences that have fragmented with the proliferation of cable and Internet offerings.

Faced with audience fragmentation, media organizations are searching for ways to expand into new markets and to re-aggregate audiences that have fragmented due to the growth of cable and online media, that is, to re-direct them toward nodes on their proprietary networks. During the Gulf War in 1991, CNN's "never-ending story" approach to journalism gave the all-news-network the legitimacy, ratings and advertising revenue that it craved. The dramatically aestheticized coverage of the Gulf War put CNN on the map as a global provider of news and as a significant competitor to the major U.S. networks. Moreover, CNN's coverage of the Gulf War helped kindle an interest in Western commercial television among elite-urban populations in India and other "emerging markets" in Asia and the Middle East. The same year liberalization policies were introduced in India, which opened the door for large global media conglomerates. The introduction of cable and satellite technologies, plus the growing strength of the advertising market expanded the industry exponentially. India went from having one state-controlled channel in 1991 to nearly 70 cable and satellite channels in 1998. These included big transnational media organizations such as Hong Kong-based STAR (Satellite Television Asian Region), BBC, Discovery, Sony, Disney, CNBC and, of course the already established CNN.

In the Middle East, Cable News Egypt (CNE) was approved by the Egyptian government in 1990. CNE, later re-named Cable Network Egypt, is operated in a cooperative arrangement with CNN. It rebroadcasts Cable News Network International (CNNI) within Egypt. In 1996, Al Jazeera became the first 24-hour satellite news network in the Arab world. Referred to by staff as the "CNN of the Arab world," the Qatar-based all-news channel has been the target of criticism from some Arab governments for its relatively freewheeling discussions of sex, government corruption and Islamic fundamentalism. The station is operated under a quasi-BBC model that provides it with a \$30-million (U.S.) annual subsidy from Qatar's emir. It also receives advertising and subscription revenue.²⁹ There is also a 24-hour broadcast channel that caters to a worldwide Iranian audience. NITV, a Farsi-language news, lifestyle and cultural programming station started broadcasting in June, 2000 from Los Angeles. It also employs recombinant program formats, including a morning show in the style of ABC's *Good Morning America*. NITV

repeats its 12-hour cycle program cycle during daytime hours in Tehran. It too is trying to skim the cream off of a relatively small worldwide affluent Iranian audience. Some of the station's sponsors include Porsche and Sharp Electronics.³⁰

Daya Kishan Thussu argues that the privatization of broadcasting in India has followed the global trend toward market forces dominating the broadcast agenda. The commodification of news and information in India means, as it has in other countries, that melodramatic narratives emphasizing basic character types are favored over the complexities of historical and economic context.³¹ These more universal human-interest stories are far more transposable among various countries and disparate cultures than economic and political stories tied to the specificity of place.

These stories are all the more important for global broadcasters, such as CNN, because research has shown that the majority of broadcast news coverage around the world is regional or local in focus. In 1991, research conducted by the International Institute of Communications examining television newscasts in 87 countries indicated that an overwhelming preponderance of news stories were about local or regional issues. In Latin America, the local/regional share reached 92 percent. Seventy-eight percent of the stories broadcast in Japan were about that country, while in North America the proportion was 80 percent.³² In other words, cultural and national differences in news coverage remain an important aspect of the overall news environment.³³ Major networks have begun to offer services in local languages and dialects;³⁴ but, in order to overcome the barriers of language, culture and place, the all-news satellite and cable networks must rely on stories that translate easily. They rely on stories which are decontextualized and socially constructed to meet the needs of different media's promotional interests. The dramatic portrayal of the *Crisis in the Gulf* fit the bill. Of course, the fact that the bloody conflict directly affected dozens of nations, added value to the story. But the direct interest that millions of people had in the war does not discount the need on the part of news organizations to aestheticize the war. Besides, as Erik Sorenson, MSNBC Vice President, says: "The big problem in cable is that nobody watches unless there's a big story."³⁵

The Terror of 24-Hour Storytelling Spectacles

The aestheticization process was re-enacted with chilling sameness following the horrific September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York City's World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. Audiences for the all-news cable channels were once again offered a parade of retired generals and "security experts" providing endless speculation about the tactics used by the suspected perpetrators of the attacks.

As in the "War in the Gulf," the emotional intensity of the coverage enabled news organizations to aestheticize the war in a way that both encouraged audience involvement across gender, class, and racial demographics and contributed to a steady stream of stories that meshed with conventional norms of storytelling. The attacks and the response to them can be read as a liminal moment in which the sacred values of a community are rehearsed. The *New York Times*, as part of its coverage, ran a series of stories about the lives of people killed and injured by the disaster. One story went further to examine the "new context" of grief for those mourning the passing of people unrelated to the events of September 11. "As thousands of families who lost someone at the World Trade Center have mourned in the glare of history," wrote Shaila Dewan, "thousands more who lost someone to sickness, old age or accident have mourned in its shadow."³⁶ The "Portraits of Grief" series was later posted to the Web site (www.nytimes.com) where a hardcover book of the collection was available for purchase. Proceeds went to a fund for victims of the attack.

It must be said that the ritual of public mourning was itself shadowed by a jingoistic backlash against dissent and a call for national unity at all costs.³⁷ Two newspaper columnists, Dan Guthrie with *The Daily Courier* in Grant Pass, Oregon and Tom Gutting with *The Texas City Sun*, were fired for writing mild criticisms of President Bush's behaviour immediately following the attacks. Well-known conservative pundit Anne Coulter also had her column in the *National Review* axed after writing that any Arab countries that supported the terrorists should be invaded and "converted to Christianity." FedEx and other companies withdrew their advertising from the ABC talk-show *Politically Incorrect* after host Bill Maher

quipped that only those people who attack others beyond the range of retaliation could properly be labeled cowardly, not people who were willing to die for a political or religious cause.

In Canada, Sunera Thobani, a critic of U.S. foreign policy, became the subject of police scrutiny. An unidentified complainant alleged the assistant professor of Women's Studies at the University of British Columbia had contravened Canada's hate crime laws when she described U.S. foreign policy as being "soaked in blood." Her comments attracted considerable attention in the United States after they were featured prominently on the infamous *Drudge Report* Web site. The complaint was later dismissed as unfounded.

In addition, the clampdown on dissent spilled over into other stories. A consortium of news organizations had been planning to publish the results of a recount of the Florida presidential ballots in the fall of 2001. After September 11, the project was temporarily shelved. *New York Times* reporter Richard Berke would write that the project designed to determine who the legitimate president of the United States is, "now seems utterly irrelevant."³⁸ An issue that on September 10 would have been *the* story covered by all major media organizations had been summarily spiked. Consortium members eventually published the results on November 12, 2001. The results of the study—reported by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, indicating that George Bush would have won the race by a slender margin even if the United States Supreme Court had not ordered a recount of the disputed Florida ballots—remain disputed. According to Erik Sorenson, president of MSNBC, there simply was not enough dissent of the American government's conduct following 9-11 to warrant coverage of this finding. "Most of the dissent we've had on the air is the opposite," Sorenson told the *New York Times*, "—conservatives like John McCain and Bill Bennet saying we should bomb more or attack Iraq."³⁹

Coverage of U.S. forces bombing Afghanistan was enormously expensive, especially at a time when broadcast and print news organizations were suffering from depressed advertising revenue and rising newsprint costs. At the same time, flying high on the jingoistic trend, CNN chairman Walter Isaacson ordered his staff to "balance" images and stories about civilian casualties and destruction in Afghanistan with reminders that the Taliban government had harbored terrorists thought responsible for the September 11 attacks.

To be sure, economic interest was not the sole factor driving the coverage of September 11. The terrorist attacks and the events flowing from them were of undeniable news value and importance. If these events do not justify 24-hour coverage, then what does? At the same time, “America Strikes Back” was a promotional fulcrum point of enormous proportions for the all-news networks. “This is costing a fortune to sit and wait,” one CNN employee told the *Globe and Mail* prior to the American-led bombing campaign on Afghanistan. “The suits in Atlanta are worried about the profit margins. But there’s no question this has been good for our ratings. We’re still at the top of our game.”⁴⁰ Predictably, the ratings for 24-hour cable news skyrocketed to levels seen in 1991 during the Gulf War.⁴¹ However, this time CNN was not the lone 24-hour cable channel with exclusive pictures. Qatar-based Al Jazeera quickly became the main source of pictures from the Afghani war zone.

CNN used its advantage in foreign bureaus to temporarily re-establish its ratings dominance over rivals MSNBC and Fox during the first couple of weeks following September 11. Eventually, MSNBC and Fox gained ground. Both networks saw an opportunity in the conflict to expand their international news presence. MSNBC capitalized on the media buzz surrounding anchorwoman Ashleigh Banfield handing the bespectacled 33-year-old her own prime-time program entitled “A Region in Conflict.” According to MSNBC President Eric Sorrenson, Banfield “connects” with the network’s target audience of people aged 25 to 54.⁴² Fox, however, was most aggressive. The network hired Steve Harrigan, one of the first Western TV reporters to enter Afghanistan, away from CNN. Harrigan was snapped up by Fox after its chief rival failed to renew his contract. Then in a promotional coup, Fox lured Geraldo Rivera away from his popular prime-time talk show on CNBC. Rivera, whose chequered career includes working as a foreign correspondent, searching Al Capone’s vault, and having his nose broken by a chair in a brawl with white supremacists, joined Harrigan as a war correspondent in Afghanistan. “I’m feeling more patriotic than at any time in my life,” Rivera told the *Associated Press*, “itching for justice, or maybe just revenge.”⁴³ So much for professional objectivity. Reporters and talk-show personalities steeped in patriotic fervour are now hot wartime commodities.

Meanwhile, Fox allowed dozens of cable and satellite channels around the world, free access to its network feed. *New York Times* reporter Jim Rutenberg summed up the strategy: “Fox News Channel executives clearly hope that it can become for its parent company, the News Corporation, what CNN is for AOL Time Warner—a global news brand with an international reach (and ad sales power).”⁴⁴

The growing Arab-language news market being developed by Al Jazeera did not pass unnoticed by MSNBC. The company signed a deal in May 2001 with an Egyptian partner (www.gn4me.com), to run an Arabic-language version of the MSNBC Web site (www.gn4msnbc.com). But the company chose to announce the venture in October during the U.S.-led air strikes in Afghanistan. “Certainly there’s an interest in that region in American culture and business,” Michael Salata, MSNBC’s business development manager, told *Wired* magazine, “as well as other stories in the living and travel sections.”⁴⁵ In August of that year, CNN announced its own plans to operate (www.cnnarabic.com). MSNBC and Fox, like all-news cable pioneers CNN in 1991, were tapping into the spectacle of a massive war effort in an attempt to expand their international brand strength and market presence. Web traffic to online news sites saw a corresponding spike after the attacks of September 11.⁴⁶

Conclusion

It is true that spectacular media events such as 9-11 are not friction free. Death, particularly dead Americans, tends to frighten potential U.S. advertisers. As the first anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks approached, many advertisers served notice that they did not want to be seen exploiting the moment for crass commercial purposes.⁴⁷ Similar concerns were expressed in February, 2003 as the U.S. government marshalled its military forces for an invasion of Iraq. “It depends on the product. It depends on the campaign,” said one un-named advertising executive quoted in *Electronic Media*. The ad man went on to explain that “if its local and no fatalities, it’s one thing; if it’s domestic and there are fatalities, it’s another....if it’s not on our soil, it’s easier to compartmentalize.”⁴⁸

The ambiguities and contingencies of the war commodity notwithstanding, the terrorist attacks of 9-11 were used as a *promotional fulcrum point* for 24-hour news organizations. Melodramatic storytelling involving struggles between good and evil

were used by news organizations to aestheticize the attacks. Media spectacles built on melodramatic narratives are market-driven commodities generated by economic competition among 24-hour news organizations. The transpose-ability and efficiency of the good-versus-evil narrative of terror was used by media organizations to anchor broader strategies of capital accumulation. Following Andrew Wernick, we may say that *media events are produced as commodity signs*: goods produced both as commodities for sale and as advertisements for themselves. Market production and promotion are “integrally conjoined.” The promotion of commodities is not a separate activity that is added externally following production. Promotion is constitutive of the production process itself. The style, flair, and feel of media events contribute to their material construction; conversely, a media event’s production is a key element in its ability to act as a promotional sign.⁴⁹

It is in this context that the online edition of the *Chicago Tribune* used the headline “When Evil Struck America: A Time Capsule of 10 Historic Days,” to promote its commemorative September 11 CD-ROM. The CD—inserted into copies of the paper’s Sunday September 8, 2002 edition—marked the one-year anniversary of the disaster. Sales for the Sunday edition of the paper spiked by about 100,000 copies; it sold separately for \$5.95, including shipping and handling. The proceeds went to charity.⁵⁰

Notes

¹ Don Flournoy and Robert Stewart, *CNN: making news in the global market*. (Luton: University of Luton Press, 1997), pp. 1-3.

² Flournoy, pp. 1-3.

³ Richard Parker, *Mixed Signals: the prospects for global television news*. (New York: The Twentieth Century Press, 1995), p. 52.

⁴ Brent MacGregor *Live, Direct and Biased?: making television news in the satellite age*. (London and New York: Arnold, 1997), 143.

⁵ Parker, p. 52.

⁶ Parker, p. 65.

⁷ Herman and McChesney, p. 39.

⁸ Flournoy and Stewart, p. 33.

⁹ Parker, pp 40-41.

¹⁰ Flournoy and Stewart, p 6.

¹¹ Flournoy and Stewart, p 3.

¹² Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2nd Edition. (Oxford and Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2000), p. 167.

¹³ Castells, p. 78.

¹⁴ Philip Graham, "Hypercapitalism: a political economy of informational idealism," *New Media & Society* 2, no. 2 (2000), p. 139.

¹⁵ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 156-157.

¹⁶ Harvey, pp. 156-57.

¹⁷ Harvey, p. 347.

¹⁸ Pirandello's 1921 play *Six Characters in Search of an Author: A Comedy in the Making* is, as the title suggests, about the struggle of six character "types" to convince a group of actors rehearsing a play to use them – and in so doing, put them to work in a work of art. The play begins with the characters (including, 'the father,' 'the mother,' 'the step-daughter' and 'the boy') confronting the actors with their demand as they begin rehearsal.

¹⁹ Baum, Caroline "Election and O.J. Mini-Series Vie for View-ers," *Bloomberg News*, November 15, 2000.

²⁰ Caryn James, "Breathless Coverage Blurs Divide of Fact and Farce," *The New York Times*, 20 November 2000, sec. A, p. 15.

²¹ James, sec. A, p. 15.

²² Shanto Iyengar and Adam Simon, "News Coverage of the Gulf Crisis and Public Opinion: a study of agenda-setting, priming, and framing," in *Taken by Storm: The Media, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy in the Gulf War*, ed. W. Lance Bennett and David L. Paletz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 179.

²³ Howard Kurtz, "NBC's News Machine Marches to War," *The Washington Post*, 21 April 1999, sec. C, p. 1.

²⁴ Wayne Walley, (1992) "Basic Cable Ratings Rise in January," *Electronic Media* (17 February 1992), p. 4.

²⁵ Douglas Kellner, *The Persian Gulf TV War*, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press. 1992), p. 87.

²⁶ Doug Weaver, "Dallas: four brands at work in 'coopetition,'" in *Extending the Brand: Newspaper Editor's Guide to Partnerships and Diversification in a Converging Media World*, ASNE, (Reston, VA: American Society of Newspaper Editors, Publication Fulfillment, 2000), p. 28.

²⁷ Howard Kurtz, "Whistle-Stops Candidates Flock to the Talk Shows," *The Washington Post*, 23 April 1999, sec. C, p. 1.

²⁸ Wernick, Andrew *Promotional Culture: Advertising, Ideology and Symbolic Expression*, (London, Sage, 1991).

²⁹ Mohammed el-Nawawy, "A Window on the Arab World," *The Baltimore Sun*, 23 July 23 2001, sec. A, p. 2.

³⁰ Jordan Raphael, "All the Iranian News, All the Time," *The New York Times*, 24 July 2000, sec. C, p.11.

³¹ Daya Kishan Thussu, "Privatizing the Airwaves: the impact of globalization on broadcasting in India," *Media, Culture and Society* 21, no.1, (1999), pp. 126-129.

³² InterMedia, "The Global News Agenda," *InterMedia*, (January-February and March-April, 1992). Cited in Parker, p. 78.

³³ Akiba Cohen, Mark R. Levy, Itzhak Roeh and Michael Gurevitch, *Global Newsrooms, Local Audiences: a study of the Eurovision News Exchange*. (London: John Libbey and Company, 1996). Roger Wallis and Stanley J. Baran, *The Known World of Broadcast News: International News and the Electronic Media*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).

³⁴ Chris Barker, *Global Television: An Introduction*, (Oxford and Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 40-42.

³⁵ Howard Kurtz, "Don't Touch That Demographic!," *The Washington Post*, 8 May 8 2000, sec. C, p. 1.

³⁶ Shaila K. Dewan, "Beyond Calamity, Death Goes On," *The New York Times*, 17 October 2001, sec. D, p. 1.

³⁷ Bill Carter and Felicity Barringer, "In Patriotic Time, Dissent is Muted," *The New York Times*, 28 September 2001, sec. A, p. 1. Simon Hopt, "The War on Dissent," *The Globe and Mail*, 6 October 6 2001, sec. R, p. 1.

³⁸ Richard Berke, "Aftermath: it's not a time for Party, but for how long?," *The New York Times*, 23 September 2001, sec. D, p. 3.

³⁹ Alessandra Stanley, "Opponents of War Are Scarce on Television," *The New York Times*, 9 November 9 2001, sec. B, p. 4.

⁴⁰ Miro Cernetig, "Lights, Action, Roll War," *The Globe and Mail*, 2 October 2001, sec. R, p. 1.

⁴¹ Matt Kempner, "CNN Garners Top Ratings for Attack Coverage," *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 3 October 2001, sec. B, p. 4C.

⁴² Paul Farhi, "Crunch Time," *American Journalism Review*, (November 2000), p. 42.

⁴³ David Bauder, "Geraldo Rivera Goes From CNBC to Fox," in *Associated Press* [online]. November 2001, [cited 1 November 2001]; available from (<http://news.excite.com/news/ap/011101/19/ent-fox-rivera>).

⁴⁴ Jim Rutenberg, "Hearts, Minds and Satellites," *The New York Times*, 15 October 2001, sec. C, p. 1.

⁴⁵ Farhad Manjoo, "'Good News' for Arabs on MSNBC," in *Wired.com* [online], October 2001, [cited 17 October 2001]; available from (<http://www.wired.com/news/conflict/0,2100,47638,00.html>).

⁴⁶ Bernhard Warner, "MSNBC Launches Arabic News Site, CNN to Follow," in *Reuters*, [online], Oct 2001, [cited 16 October 2001]; available from (<http://www.excite.com>).

⁴⁷ Stuart Elliott, "Many Marketers Will Forgo Ads During Sept. 11," in *New York Times*, [online], August 2002, [cited 28 August 2002]; available from (<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/08/28/business/media/28ADCO.html>).

⁴⁸ Louis Chunovic, "War: sponsors take wait-and-see stance," *Electronic Media* (30 September 2002): 10. In *Lexis Nexus*. [Internet] [cited 6 October 2002]; available from (<http://www.lexis.com>).

⁴⁹ Wernick, p. 15.

⁵⁰ Mark Fitzgerald, "Chicago Trib' Circulation Gets 9/11 Boost," *Editor and Publisher*, [online] October 2002, [cited 1 October 2002]; available from (http://www.editorandpublisher.com/editorandpublisher/headlines/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1726110).

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