

Addendum to Bulletin no. 15

Behind the News: Visions for Peace - Voices of Faith

Editorial Analysis: Media and September 11

One story covered to the exclusion of much else: Perspective from the United States

On the six-month anniversary of September 11, a US television network sponsored by a cell phone company offered two hours of prime time evening viewing for a documentary on the tragedy. The subject matter and pre-show publicity dealt exclusively with the events of September 11. The programme ran without the usual commercial interruptions. It had a larger audience than any other non-sports broadcast in the past year.

Much like that show, media in America have provided extensive coverage of September 11 and its aftermath. The extraordinary amounts of time and space made available, however, have generally been used to emphasize and re-emphasize certain, well-defined aspects of the crisis. Other dimensions have not been explored with comparable intensity or depth.

Three images, three colours and three phrases have framed and reframed the story from the beginning.

The abiding *images* are the terrible instants the airliners hit the towers, a determined president rallying the nation, and a masterful secretary of defense defining the counter-attack.

The three *colours* are red, white and blue. Media, including major TV networks and web sites, have woven these national colors into their presentations of information and even their corporate logos. In its electronic versions, the tricolour waves.

The key *words* are “the war on terrorism”, “evil”, and “America strikes back”. These, or variations of them, are repeated often. In media that serve the largest audiences, the terms are rarely clarified or questioned.

This brief overview is based on media that have the power to “come and find” their audiences where they live, work, travel, shop and relax. Other, less powerful, media voices can be heard, including dissenting voices, but most citizens’ media habits mean that they would have to make an effort to find these alternatives.

Alternative sources of information and alternative opinions remain on the margins of political discourse and public debate. They can be found, however, in longer-format articles and programming, including major magazines and newspapers.

Perhaps most striking is the variety of alternative information circulating in cyber-space. Like a cloud of meteorites, these hit e-mail addresses and websites with elements missing from the mainstream media version of “the story”. Included are facts and opinions from abroad, so often excluded from the time and space devoted to the story by mass-audience media.

There is no doubt about September 11, the story. From impact to importance, it had and still has everything that warrants maximum media coverage. Within hours, the sheer horror of what had happened gave rise to the term “ground zero”, evoking Hiroshima. The attack scorched the heart and soul of the nation whose commercial and media capital is Manhattan. For that reason and in compassionate deference

to the suffering symbolized by ground zero, media discussion and debate in America have been and still are noticeably restrained.

As a result, much that is both relevant and important about the drama begun by September 11 remains unexplored for the majority of citizens in the drama's leading player.

One major "story" mostly ignored in the coverage, for example, is the pre-existing humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and how that crisis has fared since September. Public donations, one indicator of what story the media are telling in a time of crisis, have broken all records for aid to the survivors of the terrorist attacks. Meanwhile, gifts for Afghanistan and the media listings that trigger them, are comparable to donations toward a strong earthquake in a distant place with no particular claim to fame.

Media coverage has not happened in a vacuum. It reflects other forces in society. It is as if four "towers" have arisen quickly to replace the two that were so horribly annihilated. The four towers are: a solid majority of the people, the government, the economy and the media. All rose up in self-defence, an imperative under the circumstances.

The question now is: Will this fortress - the united-we-stand outlook, the solid wall of consensus between the four "towers", and the narrow view they offer of the rest of the world - prove to be a barrier to understanding and resolving a crisis with implications far beyond its wall?

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Finding other views: A perspective from South Africa

Minutes after the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centre in the United States last year, global media giants like the CNN bombarded the international audience with the headline "America under attack", and repeated the phrase "the world will never be the same again". On the Tuesday of the attacks, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), South Africa's public broadcaster, transmitted stories of the attacks in the second person, borrowing from CNN sources, and the free-to-air television channel ETV followed suit. The South African public were soon served with a steady diet of "the world will never be the same again" and then "America's new war against terrorism".

But when the United States embassies in two African countries were bombed a few years ago, "the world will never be the same" headline was not heard. Is it because the attacks this time happened on US soil itself?

When US strikes against *Al Qaeda* targets in Afghanistan began, the rhetoric could no longer hold since the SABC and ETV had assigned their correspondents to cover the story first-hand. Newspaper editorials recalled memories of the American delegation "arrogantly" storming out of the World Conference Against Racism right here in Durban, just days before the attacks. In the public eye, the United States was losing the "victimhood" status that September 11 appeared to confer, as the images of the civilian casualties of "America Strikes Back" hit television screens across South Africa.

There was limited discussion in the press on the US foreign policy issues that may have perhaps contributed to September 11. The search for Osama Bin Laden, the alleged mastermind of the attacks, took centre-stage. Public television broadcasters presented a fairly complete picture of issues arising from

the attacks on both sides. Some South African newspapers, however, took up the war chant - that this new "War on Terror" was one between good and evil.

The SABC broadcast the story on past business deals between George W. Bush, Sr. and Osama Bin Laden, following a similar story on BBC television. But this story died a natural death when no follow-up was made to determine the truth of the allegations. The perspective of the Arab world on September 11 had a significant impact on South Africa's Muslim and Asian populations through *Al Jazeera* and other Arab media. The SABC and ETV competed to present the fullest picture of events to accommodate these interests as well.

The role of the media in a globalising world is to tell any story as it unfolds, in the awareness that their reports will form the basis of future policy and today's realities. The media should make the public aware of all reasonable perspectives.

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