

Preface

A. MICHAEL NOLL

ABSTRACT *This issue of the journal Prometheus includes an edited collection of papers by communication and media scholars from around the globe treating the social and societal aspects of the use of telecommunication and mass media tied to the tragic events that occurred in the United States on September 11, 2001.*

Keywords: terrorism, World Trade Center, September 11, telecommunication, communications, mass media.

Introduction: The *Prometheus* Symposium

In response to the events of September 11, 2001, this issue of the journal *Prometheus* includes an edited collection of papers treating social and societal aspects of the use of telecommunication and mass media during the tragedy.

The events of September 11 were totally unexpected and could never have been planned for, but scholars around the globe saw the immediate value of research into the many social aspects of this local, national and global tragedy that involved many dimensions of communication, technology and policy at all levels.

We are pleased to have a collection of papers describing the results of their research and analyses of this tragedy. This is perhaps the greatest tribute they—as academic researchers—can make. Humanists, social scientists, and engineers can help the world understand events that challenge our perceptions of the world. They can draw lessons from disaster by critically and systematically exploring these events from their own disciplinary perspectives. It is for this reason that this special symposium issue of *Prometheus* was assembled.

The call for papers asked scholars around the globe to consider such topics as the use of wireless, e-mail, and conventional telephone services. As examples, AT&T's traffic was 40% more than its past busiest day; wireless calls were made from the doomed airplanes and buildings, with the human voice having a calming influence; e-mail was used to overcome distance and time zones. Another topic of interest was the mass media and their use and behavior during the tragedy, applying what has been learned from the behavior of the mass media in past crises

to the events of today. An interest was also expressed in computers and information technology and its recovery from the tragedy. The use of the Internet as a mass medium to obtain information worldwide was yet another topic of interest. Scholars were also asked to consider the international communication aspects of the tragedy.

This symposium is a beginning to what promises to be a growing effort to understand and learn from the events of September 11. Many of the studies reported here are in their early stages, and many other studies will undoubtedly be undertaken. All the contributors hope that this symposium will contribute to a better understanding of these tragic events and help foster more research on the ways in which communication, technology, and society interact in sometimes disastrous but often heroic ways.

A Global Tragedy

Words fail to express the feelings of horror of the tragedy of September 11. Such terms as 'terrorist', 'tragedy', and 'attacks' are inevitably evaluative and pose real challenges to disinterested academic neutrality, but the enormity of the events of that day were indeed overwhelming to most people in the United States and the world, and academics are part of the world rocked by these events. Indeed, researchers are part of the very world they study. In this case, thousands of lives of people from many countries were lost in the attacks on the Pentagon in Washington, DC and the World Trade Center in New York City. The total destruction of the World Trade Center was witnessed live on television as both of the Twin Towers collapsed, plunging Wall Street and financial markets around the world into a financial crash from which it took months to recover. Years will be required for New York City to restore the destruction of many square blocks of lower Manhattan. Hundreds of firefighters and police were lost at the World Trade Center.

The memories of September 11 will always be vivid. Live televised images are forever embedded in our minds of the aircraft crashing into the towers of the World Trade Center and the ultimate collapse of both towers; of people fleeing for their lives to escape a crushing wave of debris; and of firefighters and police grieving over their lost comrades. Phone calls were made to loved ones from people in the doomed buildings, and wireless calls from the doomed aircraft. The telephone network was strained as people called family members and friends seeking comfort and solace in hearing a human voice. E-mail and the Internet informed colleagues and friends around the world of the unfolding tragedy.

Television bombarded the world with continuous coverage for days after the tragedy, even though there frequently was little new to report. Over-the-air broadcast television was wiped out in the New York metropolitan area, except for WCBS which had a back-up transmitter on top of the Empire State Building. Television lost its role as a means of escapism for many. Newspapers and magazines carried photographs of people jumping to their deaths to escape the inferno of the burning buildings. People told stories of the experiences of themselves and friends as a way to cope and relieve their feelings of horror and grief.

Communication and its infrastructure were essential that day. This infrastructure is multifaceted, including many forms of interpersonal communication, such as face-to-face. Mediated interpersonal telecommunication over the telephone, e-mail, and wireless cell phones are also part of this communication

infrastructure. The communication infrastructure also encompasses a wide variety of mass media, such as radio, television, the print of newspapers and magazines, and information obtained over the Internet. All media played a role on September 11.

On the day, telecommunication infrastructures functioned mostly as designed and facilitated worldwide communication over a variety of modalities. The mass media carried the unfolding tragedy instantly around the globe. Communication technologies of all kinds functioned as the means that most people first heard about the tragedy and then as the means to share feelings and cope with the tragedy. These communication technologies included the conventional broadcast mass media of radio and television, the Internet as a source of news and information, the telephone, wireless cellular service, and e-mail. Emergency communications for the police and firefighters at the World Trade Center area were overwhelmed, however, on September 11.

The real drama was not technology but the social impact of communications—both telecommunications and the media—on people. This drama is the motivation for this symposium of papers on the social impacts of communications on September 11.

The Papers

The themes of the papers show clearly the central role of communications during the tragedy. Broadcast television and radio was how many people heard about the events of September 11, but person-to-person communication over the telephone and face-to-face was also significant. People told other people about the tragedy and coped with their feelings through storytelling. As conventional telephone lines became clogged, people turned to their cell phones, and sometimes vice versa. Calls from the doomed aircraft and buildings were made on cell phones—words that will be forever remembered by those receiving the calls. The new medium of the Internet was important, both for e-mail and also for obtaining information about the unfolding tragedy. The Internet particularly became a major source of news in countries where it took too long for the conventional news media to translate coverage from English.

The symposium papers can be grouped into various clusters. The first group of papers focuses on how people learned of the tragedy and their activities in response. The second cluster of papers treats the use of the telephone, cell phones, and relatively new medium of the Internet. The third cluster discusses the use of conventional mass media, such as television and magazines. The symposium ends with essays on the effects of media globalization on terrorism. Many of the papers draw lessons from the use and performance of communications on September 11 and give specific advice for the future.

How People Learned of the Tragedy

Telecommunication by the telephone, facsimile, cellular wireless, and e-mail all played essential roles during the tragedy, as described in the first grouping of papers. Television and radio (over 50%) were important ways that people in the United States learned of the tragedy, but conversation (about 40%) over the telephone and face-to-face was also important. In Estonia, face-to-face (47%) was the single most important way that people learned of the tragedy.

Dr John Carey describes how people used communications during and immediately after the tragedy, particularly television but also multiple sources of information. Professor Everett Rogers and Ms Nancy Seidel report on their diffusion study of how people in New Mexico first heard about the tragedy and what they immediately did. The majority of people in New Mexico were at home and heard about the tragedy from television, radio, and person-to-person either directly or over the telephone. Ms Elisia L. Cohen, Professor Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach, Ms Joo-Young Jung and Mr Yong-Chan Kim describe the role of media and interpersonal storytelling in information dissemination and also present a model based on a communication infrastructure approach. Ms Pille Vengerfeldt examines the use of the Internet and newspaper coverage in Estonia for different narratives about the attacks. She determined that people in Estonia first learned about the attacks from face-to-face contacts and also from radio. She discusses the role of the Internet in a country where conventional media is delayed because of the need to translate from English.

Telecommunications: Telephones, Wireless, and the Internet

Conventional telecommunication over the telephone and wireless cell phones was essential during the tragedy. The Internet is a relatively new medium for obtaining information during a crisis and was used during the tragedy, both to obtain information and also to discuss feelings about the attacks.

Professor William H. Dutton and Mr Frank Nainoa describe how wireless telephones were used from the doomed aircraft and also from the attacked buildings. Professor James E. Katz and Professor Ronald E. Rice categorize the use of telephone and cell phones during the crisis and suggest a broader 'syntopian' perspective. Dr Paul Rappoport explores data about the use of the Internet during the tragedy. The data shows a dramatic increase in the usage of Internet news sites on September 11. This increased usage of Internet news sites seems significant even after the tragedy, according to his analysis. Mr Patrick Martin and Mr Sean Phelan describe how Islam was represented on US television and CNN's messageboard. Media theories are used to explain differences in the representations.

The Multifaceted Roles of Mass Media

The more traditional mass media were essential during the attacks, particularly the visual imagery of live television, but newspapers and magazines gave more detailed information, without the sensationalism of television.

Professor Tamar Liebes and Professor Menahem Blondheim write about the influence of media on the political process that is created by marathon coverage of crises by the media. Professor Joachim W. H. Haes compares magazine coverage in the United States and Germany of the attacks. In particular, he examines the broader coverage of the tragedy by the German weekly *Der Spiegel*. Ms Fiona McNeel examines the effects of television coverage and programming during and after the attacks. She discusses how programs were pulled from television and movie screens to avoid anything deemed too sensitive. The content of one episode of the US television program *The West Wing* is analyzed in terms of its attempt to highlight prejudice against ethnic groups.

Media Globalization

Professor James William Carey discusses the role of communications in the formation of nations and as the stimulus for the creation of conditions conducive to terrorism. Professor René-Jean Ravault discusses the effects of the globalization of US mass entertainment media on fostering the environment for terrorism.

Conclusion

The most exciting research is usually stimulated by the problems of the real world. This most certainly was the case for the research reported in the papers in this symposium. Researchers seized the opportunity to investigate the events of September 11 from the perspectives of their personal interests and past work.

Although nearly all aspects of communications on September 11 are treated in the symposium, a few are unfortunately missing, simply because no papers relevant to these aspects were submitted. Two such areas are emergency communications and newspapers. It is hoped that future activities, such as a conference and an edited book, will be able to be more inclusive.