How News Coverage Has Changed Since the 9/11 Attacks

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The horror of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks brought changes to the way news is covered. On Sept. 11, 2001, it didn't matter if you were anchorman Tom Brokaw of NBC News or a rookie reporter at a small town newspaper, you were faced with a crisis you never before experienced or could have imagined. The decisions that were made in newsrooms across the country have left a lasting change in how media outlets cover stories to this day.

Sensationalism Gives Way to Sensitivity

The attacks needed no hyperbole, no creative writing to make them appear worse than they already were. In the days after the attacks, David Westin, the president of ABC News, ordered that video of the jets hitting the World Trade Center in New York City not be repeated over and over so as not to disturb viewers, especially children.

That was a landmark decision, considering how many times Americans had been exposed to video of the Space Shuttle Challenger explosion and the assassination of Pres. John F. Kennedy. Before then, if you had good video you usually exploited it.
Today, news organizations are re-examining coverage of violent stories, such as the Virginia Tech massacre. Some are deciding that even when video is available, it is too graphic to put on TV.

**Technology Brings Personal Stories to Life**

Cell phones helped bring the horror to life on 9/11, as frantic people made calls to search for loved ones and to get help. While the news media has access to fragments of calls, most will never be heard on the public airwaves. Today, cell phones can snap photos and record videos and post them online. In the rush to get the story on the air, news managers have to decide how to use this form of communication. A key question is whether to use only the images that were sent directly to the media outlet, or to use whatever you can find on the Internet without regard to privacy or ownership. The same is true for posts on Twitter or Facebook, which didn't exist in 2001. A media company needs to establish a social media policy about how to use these tools.

**Patriotism Finds Its Place on TV**

Remember the U.S. flag pins that politicians and newscasters began wearing shortly after the attacks? At first, they were seen as a sign that America would stand strong. Before long, critics said they were being used to show support for then-Pres. George W. Bush.

News organizations that would never take a political stance were faced with a unique dilemma -- by keeping the pins, some might think they supported a political agenda. Take them off and others would accuse them of being un-American. ABC was one organization with a policy stating symbols could not be worn. The pin flap has faded, but the patriotism battle continues over a cable TV channel. Al Jazeera English (AJE) is a news channel that presents reports from a Middle East perspective, offering Americans a look at how people in the rest of the world view us. Cable TV companies are reportedly worried about a backlash if they offered the channel. Even though AJE has won a Columbia Journalism Award, it's tough to find it on most U.S. cable systems. It's only recently been added in New York City.

**Cultural Differences Become Social Dividers**

Once the nation saw the faces and read the names of the 9/11 suspects, it became easy to target people of Middle Eastern ancestry or Islamic belief as possible terrorists. News organizations chose to actively fight that stereotyping or saw an opportunity to pander to it.

Fox News Channel has been accused of playing to Americans' fears of Muslims. Others in media are criticized for assuming that all terrorist acts since 9/11 are committed by Muslim extremists, then acting surprised when the suspects in some violent acts, like the 2011 attack in Norway, turn out to be white and Christian. Other media outlets have taken a different approach, seeking Muslims in their own communities to interview about their faith and rituals. Coverage of a threatened Islamic Jihad is replaced with stories explaining Ramadan, a holy month.

**Possible New Threats Create Coverage**

Bomb threats and mysterious white powder discoveries have become a part of U.S. society since 9/11. News managers often struggle as they decide whether rumors of a possible violent act are newsworthy or just feed into fear.

For years, a bomb threat at a neighborhood school was dismissed as the work of pranksters and ignored. Not anymore. Now they are often reported if arrests are made, even if the suspects are just mischievous teenagers.

White powder will bring out the news crews to this day. Most discoveries turn out to be harmless, like the dust found in Chicago or the instant soup uncovered in New York. Still, the coverage shows that reporters have conditioned themselves to treat every situation as serious. In the years since the attacks, journalists have a delicate balancing act. Cover every development as a breathless alert and be accused of sensationalism. Downplay threats and be blasted for putting lives in jeopardy. News managers find themselves making the same judgment calls as politicians and law enforcement experts. But all these groups now have the wisdom that comes from witnessing and surviving 9/11.