Prometheus, Vol. 20, No. 3, 2002

Catching the Wave: German Media on September 11

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ABSTRACT *This paper describes reactions in the German publication* Der Spiegel *to the attacks of September 11. The paper starts by describing the live reporting in the German media and then analyzes the* Der Spiegel *edition of September 15. The aim is to give an idea of how European journalists handled the situation and how different conclusions developed.*

Keywords: *Der Spiegel*, German media, September 11, total solidarity, international cooperation.

Press Coverage in Germany

The attacks of September 11 set a mark in the history of Western journalism. Eight minutes after the first crash, the Associated Press (AP) reported 'Plane crashes into World Trade Center'. This was the starting signal to a synchronized reporting marathon all over the world. Police, fire fighters, and radio reporters arrived simultaneously at the towers and witnessed the second plane's impact at 9.03 am. This was not about a tragic accident anymore, but it was the 'War against America', aggravated by the attacks on the Pentagon and the fourth plane's crash in Pennsylvania.

In Germany, it was a quiet afternoon. Being six hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time, radio stations broadcast information about a (small) plane damaging the World Trade Center in the 3.00 pm news—four minutes after the AP announcement. The TV news channels n-tv and N 24 were even faster as they could draw on CNN's pictures due to cooperation agreements. The first major TV channel/network to start live reporting was RTL, Germany's most successful private TV company. Its main programming alone has a market share of close to 15%. On September 11, RTL cancelled its regular program at 3.10 pm, and sent anchorman Peter Kloeppel on air for more than seven hours straight. The public TV channels, which hold a combined market share of about 40%, followed suit within the next two hours.[1]

On this day, the news coverage was primarily by broadcast media. It could have been the finest hour of online Internet media, but many Internet servers quit the service once millions of people wanted to know the full story simultaneously. As TV

Prometheus ISSN 0810-9028 print/ISSN 1470-1030 online © 2002 Taylor & Francis Ltd
http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals
DOI: 10.1080/08109020210141335

stations in the US and abroad shared the few available pictures and uncertainty mounted as to whether worse was about to happen—some spoke of nuclear attacks, some of biological weapons—most TV stations aired virtually the same program: pictures of the second plane on impact, people fleeing Manhattan, finally the towers collapsing. In between, there were cuts to the Pentagon and commentary by journalists. Later the first politicians showed up, and most European leaders quickly gave statements in support of the victims and the American government.

Bewildered by the dreadful scenes, radio and TV reporters, professionals, formed a union with their audience. Nobody knew what was going on. Too soon to explain, too soon to draw consequences, this was the time to describe the situation as it appeared, to inform people all over the world. Americans and Europeans alike were shocked to view helpless victims trapped in the upper floors of the WTC, some jumping to their certain death. Finally the towers collapsed. These pictures, broadcast to a billion people, initiated a change in the way we watch the world and foreign politics. As the whole world saw the same pictures, it generated a sense of community. All civilized nations could equally condemn the attacks and call for global justice. It came as a surprise that even nations like Libya and Iran expressed warm condolences to the American people. But could any sensible and sensitive person react differently?

On Wednesday, politicians and journalists alike resumed their professional positions. President Bush had given his speech to the nation announcing revenge on the terrorists and their supporters. Most newspapers had already printed that Osama Bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda organization were behind the attacks, even though the evidence was mainly speculative. This was the day when NATO and the Security Council of the United Nations voted to support American action against the terrorists whenever necessary. In fact, NATO had declared the incident as an attack against all of its 19 members as specified in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, making it an official war of all member states—most of them European—against an unknown enemy.

Der Spiegel *of September 15*

In Germany, *Der Spiegel* is the most influential news magazine. Journalists and politicians alike expect it to deliver thoroughly researched news and background information. *Der Spiegel* sells more than a million copies per week, but what could a weekly magazine tell about September 11? Worse, as it is published on Mondays, the editors had to expect the Sunday newspapers to give background reports first, and as there was little real information about the attacks other than their occurrence, the magazine had to make a bold step: it published the next edition 'Der Terror-Angriff: Krieg im 21. Jahrhundert' ('The Terror-Attack: War in the 21st Century') on Saturday, September 15.[2]

Members of all departments reported from their perspectives—from the American correspondents to the art editors. The first 20 pages were completely devoted to the events. The three stories featured the attacks themselves, the 'German Connection' to Hamburg and national reactions like the Chancellor signaling 'total solidarity' to the United States. Further on in the issue, another nine pages analyzed the economic consequences of the attacks including an extensive interview with the leader of Deutsche Bank, Rolf Breuer, on the prospects for the world economy. The media pages quoted TV ratings of September 11, the foreign affairs editors reported another ten pages on Osama Bin Laden and

religious fundamentalism, and two *Spiegel* reporters who had witnessed the events in New York City reported on their personal impressions on three pages each.

Personal, descriptive, painfully open, and sad in tone, reporters Thomas Hüetlin and Alexander Osang described how they experienced the disaster. Independent from each other, they had tried to get to the site after the first plane had crashed into the WTC, they saw the second impact and the south tower collapsing. Both underestimated the situation first and came dangerously close, but the attacks were only minor in their reports. In particular, Osang managed to catch the individual level as he was stuck in the basement of the Temple Court Building, hiding from dust and debris. He told the story of Sammy Fontanec, the policeman who washed his eyes, Steven Weiss, the student who wanted to break out and help. He wrote of Stefan Garrin, who was ashamed of his asthma and Eileen McGuire, whose husband worked in the 99th floor of Tower 1. On this individual level, the story of heroes and cowards, of good and evil, of right and wrong worked best. Emotions can mobilize enormous power, and exactly at this point, the one-world-vision of Western civilizations imploded.

No Common Ground Anymore

In the United States, the administration tried to transform sorrow into anger, and some media supported the move. As Lance Morrow wrote in *TIME*: 'The worst times, as we see, separate the civilized of the world from the uncivilized. This is the moment of clarity. Let the civilized toughen up, and let the uncivilized take their chances in the game they started'.[3] In Germany, too, some tabloids asked openly to 'Hunt him down' (Osama Bin Laden) or 'May he suffer in Hell forever!' (Mohammed Atta). But most publications, TV channels and commentators instead tried to calm things down: Let's try to sort things out, identify who did what and why and how we could have prevented the disaster.

This is where *Der Spiegel* achieved its true success: while electronic media reacted adequately in informing people quickly of what happened, they lacked the amount of information necessary to thoroughly evaluate the situation for two or three days. While everybody knew what had happened, nobody knew why it happened and who did it. Rumors about Osama Bin Laden being involved in the attacks were formulated quickly after the attacks, but it took investigators several weeks to present evidence to (national and international) political leaders and it never was made available to the public. In this situation, *Der Spiegel* could report on Bin Laden, his CIA past, and Muslim fundamentalism. The magazine correctly identified him as 'suspect' at that time.

Der Spiegel suffered from not being able to transport the news itself anymore, but its Saturday edition aimed precisely at giving its audience the background information they had missed since Tuesday's events. Not only the terror attacks themselves were described and analyzed, but the Taliban's immediate reactions—to close down about 20 terror camps and send condolences—were mentioned, too. The magazine asked openly if it makes any sense to declare war against an unknown enemy, and it cited politicians like Javier Solana, who vowed for dialogue and understanding instead of war and retaliation.[4] *Der Spiegel* of September 15 showed the German Chancellor swearing 'total solidarity' with the US, but also reported on anti-American sentiments in Latin America and around the world. In fact, its major contribution was to also ask the 'why' question, which turned out to be omitted in many US publications.[5]

What Might be Won and Might be Lost

On September 11, we got a glimpse of what could have developed into the nucleus of a better world. The attacks shocked members of all cultures and created a diffuse feeling of solidarity within humanity. Even Middle Eastern countries like Syria and Iran expressed their sympathy. The media joined their audience and described the dreadful scenes without taking a stand.

But all too soon, the climate changed. Journalists fell back into their old positions. Americans vowed for war, Middle-Eastern nations saw their latent anti-Americanism confirmed, and US politicians held powerful speeches against all evil, that was generally seen abroad. Politics and media agreed to foster (American) patriotism instead of 'true globalism'. The Europeans and their media stood aside asking for caution—often called 'relativism' in the US. The results were easy to see: other countries welcomed the newly available option of fighting 'terrorism' abroad. Russia could now feel safe about Chechnya, China was happy to fight 'terrorism' in Tibet. India and Israel escalated tensions with their 'terrorism supporting' neighbors, too.

But nonetheless, something has changed and many people feel the seed is sewn for closer international cooperation. If this is true, the world can still draw strength out of the infamous and cruel attacks some terrorists carried out, not only against the United States, but against humanity itself.

Notes and References

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4. *Der Spiegel*, *op. cit.*, pp. 19–22.
5. Michael Kleff, 'Wut und Patriotismus', journalist, October 2001, pp. 15–16.