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Civic Actions after September 11: Exploring the Role of Multi-level Storytelling

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ABSTRACT *Interpersonal and media storytelling were crucial to information dissemination about the September 11 tragedies. The storytelling processes through which urban residents are transformed into members of a broader community are illustrated by their connections to media and their participation in neighborhood discussions and community organizations after September 11. This study demonstrates how a communication infrastructure approach contributes to understanding participation in civil society after September 11.*

Keywords: communication infrastructure approach, interpersonal storytelling, civic actions.

Before September 11, it was not uncommon for contemporary social thinkers to convey pessimism about the future of civil society and its communal foundations (e.g. Robert Putnam), although some scholars (e.g. Michael Schudson, Robert Sampson) were arguing that this phenomenon was more complex than it seemed. After the tragedies of September 11 a narrative reaffirming citizen's commitment to 'cooperation and community in American civic life' became more common in the press. A September 19 *USA Today* article reflected the sentiment, 'strangers are talking on city buses, shoppers are more polite in grocery checkout lines, and road rage seems to have eased on highways'.[1] Preliminary public opinion data after September 11 indicated that citizens displayed more tolerance for one another[2] and placed an increased trust in government.[3] These data suggest that a latent capacity for trust in interpersonal relations and government institutions was activated by September 11, an event which may have recreated a sense of the collective 'we'.

To what extent were civic-minded feelings and behaviors in response to September 11 influenced by the nature of individuals' established connections to communication resources, or what we call the 'communication infrastructure'? More specifically, by communication infrastructure, we mean a storytelling system set within a communication action context in a residential community that

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affords residents the opportunity to reflect on and to tell stories about their daily lives.[4] The mission of our research is to examine the dynamic role of multiple levels of resources in the communication infrastructure. At the broadest macro-level, we are concerned with mainstream commercial media, which engage in storytelling production and dissemination. At the lowest micro-level, storytelling resources flow through interpersonal networks, and are often reinforced by meso-level local media and grassroots organizations when they promote community storytelling.[5] For the purposes of this paper, we examine people's media connections, organizational participation, and interpersonal storytelling to illustrate their potential influence on civic engagement in residential locales of Los Angeles County.

Media, community organizations, and interpersonal networks, to varying degrees, afford citizens the opportunity to construct a sense of 'imagined community',[6] or what we call a sense of 'belonging' to residential community.[7] In the case of September 11 narratives, news reports from both national and local storytellers contained local referents of significance: two planes flying toward Los Angeles crashed, with many Los Angelinos presumed among the dead and missing. We know anecdotally, and from personal experience, how the stories told in interpersonal conversations reinforced local concerns about terror plots to bomb Los Angeles International Airport (LAX), as well as topics distant to the residential community about the September 11 airliner attacks.

Research Inquiry

Exploring the nature of storytelling after September 11 can highlight the level of latent tendencies in individuals to engage in civil society in response to crises. The influence of interpersonal networks, organizational participation, and media connections on people's civic actions are important to consider, as such civic actions (e.g. donating blood, attending a memorial service, displaying an American flag) are crude indicators of how people participated as members of a broader community after September 11. To this end, we explore how people's connectedness to mass media and interpersonal communication changed due to the September 11 tragedy. We would expect that the ambiguity and threat wrought by September 11 turned an established multi-level storytelling network to larger issues of community, thereby increasing civic engagement.[8]

Data

A total of 331 households participated in a telephone survey assessing a range of socio-behavioral and communication variables. The participants were selected by random digit dialing (for overall research methodology, see www.metamorph.org). The survey was part of the multi-year Metamorphosis Project at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication.

In order to reach the diverse populations of the incorporated residential community on the cusp of Los Angeles, the survey was administered in the language of respondents' choice (English, Spanish, and Armenian).[9] Data collection began on August 30, 2001 and was stopped due to the events of September 11 after 141 participants had completed interviews. The survey resumed on September 21, ten days after September 11, with additional items added to account for changes in people's communication behaviors and social responses

Table 1. How respondents first learned of the September 11 tragedies

Television	40.0%
Conversation	33.7%
Radio	19.5%
Other	4.7%
Don't know	2.1%
Total	**100.0% (*n* = 190)**

after the tragedies. A total of 190 respondents participated in the survey conducted after September 11.

Forty-two percent of the survey respondents were male, while 58% were female.[10] The ethnic breakdown of the sample was 56% Caucasian, 18% Armenian, 17% Hispanic, 8% Asian, 2% African American, and 1% Native American. The median income reported was between $45,000 and $60,000, with a majority of respondents having attended at least some college or technical school. Clearly, our sample may be biased toward higher education, more female, and a higher income. Common sense also suggests that our sample also over-represents people who are interested in community issues. There are no significant differences between the samples before and after September 11 in terms of age, income, gender, or educational level.[11]

Findings

Patterns in Individuals' Media Connections Before and After September 11

We asked our respondents how they first learned about the September 11 incidents (see Table 1). Of those surveyed after September 11, 33.7% found out about the attack from a conversation with a family member, friend, neighbor or stranger. Forty percent of our sample found out about the attack from television, 19.5% from radio, and 4.7% from another source.

We then asked respondents if their media habits were influenced by the September 11 incidents (see Table 2). A majority of respondents (62.4%) reported spending more time watching television since September 11. Individuals reported spending increased time with newspapers, with radio, and engaging in inter-

Table 2. Respondents reporting increased attention toward media after September 11

Media	**(n = 190)**
Television	62.4%
Newspapers	38.5%
Talking with neighbors	31.7%
Radio	29.8%
Internet	24.1%

personal conversation, as well. Thirty-eight percent of the sample after September 11 reported that they spent more time reading newspapers, nearly a third of respondents (31.7%) reported spending more time talking with their neighbors, and 29.8% reported spending more time listening to radio. Nearly one-quarter of respondents (24.1%) reported spending more time on the Internet after September 11. Overall, 25.4% of survey respondents increased the amount of time spent with one medium, 29.2% with two media, 19.2% with three media, 6.9% with four media, and 5.4% with five media. That is, more than two-thirds of our respondents spent more time with two or more communication resources in the form of interpersonal conversation, the Internet, newspapers, television, or radio after September 11.

Civic Actions After September 11

After September 11, Americans were enlisted to take a wide variety of civic actions. We examined the degree to which respondents (n = 190) took the following civic-minded actions in response to September 11: talk about it with neighbors; talk about it with strangers; call to check on the welfare of a person you know who might have been injured; buy or display an American flag; post a message on an Internet public message forum; contribute money to a relief fund; write a letter to the editor or call in to a radio talk show; attend a memorial service for the victims; attend a candlelight vigil; or donate blood. In response to the September 11 incidents, 67.9% reported that they talked about it with their neighbors, and 48.4% reported that they talked about it with strangers. Only 5.3% wrote a letter to the editor or called in to a radio talk show, and the same percentage (5.3%) posted a message on an Internet public message forum.

A large minority of our sample (41.1%) called to check on the welfare of a person they knew who might have been injured. Almost a third (31.1%) reported attending a memorial service for the victims, and 18.4% reported attending a candlelight vigil. A majority of respondents reported contributing money to a relief fund (65.8%), or reported buying or displaying an American flag (73.2%). Twenty percent of our respondents reported donating blood.

We summated the number of affirmative responses to our ten civic action items (above) to create a scope variable that reflects the breadth of respondents' civic-minded responses to September 11 (range = 0–10; M = 3.9; SD = 1.84). Given the range of civic-minded behaviors taken in response to the September 11 tragedies, we turn to investigate to what extent the communication infrastructure acted as an emergent resource for these respondents during a time of uncertainty.

The Role of Residential Belonging

Both subjective and objective dimensions of individuals' belonging to residential communities were assessed to measure their sense of community attachment and involvement in the samples both before and after September 11.[12] Following our previous research, an eight-item belonging index (Cronbach's alpha = 0.78) estimated the degree to which residents expressed attachment and involvement with their neighbors.[13] The belonging index estimates both subjective assessments of attachment (e.g. the level of respondents' interest in knowing what their

Table 3. Storytelling individuals' civic actions after September 11

	Civic actions		
	Low (mean)	**High (mean)**	
Level of neighborhood belonging	3.620	4.268	F (1, 189) = 5.919*
Intensity of participation in neighborhood discussion	3.613	4.304	F (1,189) = 6.696**
Membership in neighborhood organizations	3.489	4.302	F (1, 189) = 9.673**

* Statistically significant at the 0.05 level.
** Statistically significant at the 0.01 level.

neighbors are like), and objective measures of involvement (e.g. the number of neighbors the respondent knows well enough to keep watch on their house or apartment). There was no significant difference in belonging between the samples before and after September 11.[14] We divided the sample after September 11 into 'high' and 'low' belonging groups (split at the median, Md = 23.000; M = 23.869; SD = 9.413). We examined whether these two groups differed in terms of their levels of participation in community related activities after September 11. We found that 'high belongers' were significantly more likely to engage in civic actions in response to September 11 than 'low belongers' (see Table 3).

The Role of Neighborhood Conversations and Organizational Participation

Two important factors in individuals' civic involvement after September 11 were individuals' participation in neighborhood storytelling and their participation in community organizations. Put simply, the more deeply embedded people are in the established communication infrastructure of their community (indicated by links to community organizations and participation in neighborhood discussions), the more likely they were to take civic actions in response to September 11. Intensity of interpersonal discussion about the residential community was measured by asking the respondent to indicate, on a scale ranging from 1 (never) to 10 (all the time), 'How often do you have discussions with other people about things happening in your neighborhood'. We divided the sample into 'high' and 'low' neighborhood discussion groups (split at the mean, n = 330; M = 5.02, SD = 2.79). There was a significant difference between the two groups in terms of the number of civic actions taken in response to the September 11 tragedy (see Table 3). Respondents who frequently had discussions with other people about things happening in their neighborhood, those who were in the 'high' neighborhood discussion group, took a broader scope of civic-minded responses to the September 11 tragedy than those who did not.

We also asked individuals whether or not they belonged to five different types of community organizations, including: (a) sport or recreational; (b) cultural, ethnic or religious; (c) neighborhood or homeowner; (d) political or educational; or (e) any other organizations or groups. Individuals who belonged to community organizations were more likely to take a broader scope of civic actions than those who did not (see Table 3).

Table 4. Correlation between media connections and civic actions after September 11

	Civic actions (n = 191)
Talking with neighbors after September 11	r = 0.286**
Reading the newspapers after September 11	r = 0.161*
Watching television after September 11	r = −0.079 n.s.
Listening to radio after September 11	r = 0.035 n.s.

n.s.: Statistically non-significant.
* Statistically significant at the 0.05 level.
** Statistically significant at the 0.01 level.

The Relative Importance of Different Storytellers on Civic Actions after September 11

The civic actions (or inaction) of individuals can be understood in terms of their participation in storytelling (in this case, about September 11). Furthermore, the extent of their participation in storytelling can be understood as a consequence of how deeply embedded they are in the communication infrastructure, by virtue of their connections to their neighbors, to community organizations, and to media that provoke them toward storytelling behavior.

Our data show that respondents who reported spending more time talking with others and reading the newspaper were more likely to have taken a broader scope of civic actions than those who did not (see Table 4). The amount of time respondents spent watching television and listening to radio after September 11 was not related to their scope of civic actions (see Table 4). These preliminary data are consistent with research linking newspapers and interpersonal conversations as crucial resources for 'political talk', opinion formation, and civic engagement in deliberative democracy.[15]

Discussion

The findings we have reported here are suggestive of a storytelling model of civic participation in a crisis. Previous research suggests that the same basic model applies in non-crisis periods.[16] There are important differences between crisis and non-crisis periods, however, what makes a difference is the speed and scope of civic activation. In the case of September 11, for example, it is likely that people's personal and collective experiences of both ambiguity and threat intensified dramatically, no matter how they learned of the events of the day. The more that people were implicated in the events directly, or felt that they might become implicated in the hours and days following September 11, the more we would expect to find them activated toward civic participation by the storytelling system. For a variety of reasons (e.g. two of the planes scheduled to arrive in LA), many residents of Los Angeles considered that they might be next.

Our position is that a parsimonious way to understand the process of civic activation after September 11 is to see it as an outcome of: (1) the extent to which residents were embedded in a storytelling system before September 11; and (2) the extent to which they were embedded in the storytelling system that arose after

September 11. There is considerable overlap in the storytelling systems before and after September 11, the major difference being the importance of mainstream as opposed to community (locally or ethnically-oriented) media after September 11. As we have shown, residents whose engagement in their residential area storytelling system (connections between residents, community organizations, and media) created relatively high levels of belonging and were more likely to take civic actions in regard to September 11. We interpret this as a generalization effect; that is, residents oriented to civic participation in their neighborhoods expanded (or redirected) their activities to a national need.

Of course, there appears to have been escalation in the level of civic participation that cannot be explained by the state of affairs before September 11. In other words, we surmise that residents who were less civically engaged before September 11 became more engaged due to their increased connectedness to key storytellers—mainstream newspapers, community organizations, and their neighbors. In this case, we observe activation of a latent potential for civic engagement.

Of the two processes—generalization and activation of latent potential—we expect that the former will be more stable over the long-term. Put simply, residents who were embedded in their residential storytelling networks before September 11 are more likely than the newly active to sustain their level of civic participation after September 11 because they are grounded in a storytelling communication infrastructure fabric. Moreover, the storytelling referent of mainstream national media had to shift as time went on from an extremely heavy focus upon September 11 to consider other stories. Thus, the after September 11 storytelling system and residents' connections to it are necessarily less stable than the storytelling system before September 11. We conclude with the common observation that the validity of these interpretations of our findings cannot be assessed until we have follow-up research that tracks people's communication and civic participation behaviors.

Notes and References

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7. Ball-Rokeach *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 394–99.

8. S. J. Ball-Rokeach, 'A theory of media power and a theory of media use: different stories, questions, and ways of thinking', *Mass Communication and Society*, 1, 1/2, 1998, pp. 5–40.
9. A survey research firm was employed using trained bilingual interviews (the survey was translated and back translated in each language) programmed for Computer Assisted Telephone Interview (CATI) administration. These unusual multilingual data collection procedures afford inclusion of non-English-speaking new immigrants often excluded from survey research.
10. Our survey response rate was 54% when calculated by dividing the number of completed interviews by the number of theoretically eligible phone numbers. Eligible phone numbers were calculated by examining the total number of study phone numbers excluding phone numbers for which eligibility could not be determined, inappropriate/duplicate phone numbers, non-qualified household phone numbers (e.g. outside study area), and the estimated number of initial refusals not likely to qualify for our study.
11. The responses after September 11 include slightly more Armenian respondents (23%), than the sample before September 11 (11%) due to the number of Armenian-speaking households identified for callback. However, there were no other significant differences in the ethnic breakdown of the samples before and after September 11.
12. Ball-Rokeach *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 405–6.
13. *Ibid*, p. 406.
14. F (1, 330) = 0.434, p = n.s.
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16. See Ball-Rokeach *et al.*, *op. cit.*; Matei and Ball-Rokeach, *op. cit.*