Live Television's Disaster Marathon of September 11 and its Subversive Potential[1]

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ABSTRACT   *Television's coverage of the tragic events of September 11 can be viewed and understood as a paradigmatic disaster marathon. The salience of the attack's visual images, their exclusivity on the screen for a protracted period, and the invisibility of their perpetrators enhanced the attack's effectiveness. The paper highlights a number of problems that the September 11 disaster marathon poses to the profession of journalism and to society, and points out possible remedies for the future. It ends with a short discussion of the ways in which television's coverage of the event both resembled and differed from the media-event model, and of theoretical aspects of its unique dimensions as a disaster marathon.*

Keywords: television, media events, disasters, disaster marathon, terrorism, September 11.

September 11: A Disaster Marathon

The perpetrators of the September 11 attack managed to spread alarm and uncertainty, even cause national trauma, through the nexus of their acts and television's coverage. The attack meant an automatic interruption of the schedules of all networks, and their rededication to an exclusive telecast of the disaster, directed in effect by the terrorists. Not only did the terrorists hijack the screen, but also managed to extend their domination by maintaining exclusivity by keeping up the suspense for days as to who was responsible for the disaster.

When major debacles occur, television interrupts its schedule for the live, open-ended, 'celebration' of the momentous event, featuring the disaster marathon. To qualify, a disaster needs victims in substantial numbers or victims of celebrity status, the dramatic failure of visible and supposedly foolproof technologies, or the collapse of a well-established and salient institutional practice. Disaster marathons may be launched by natural disasters, such as in the case of the Los Angeles earthquake; high profile accidents, such as the failed-launch of the Challenger space shuttle; or purposive public acts of major violence, such as a terrorist attack. The genre is at its most effective when television arrives in time to cover the

ongoing event while it still lacks symbolic or even narrative closure, rather than landing in its aftermath, when the structure of the event is already established and involves easily identifiable villains and heroes. In the repertoire of debacles, terrorist attacks of the 'developing' type[2]—such as the hijacking of airplanes and holding hostages—have all the ingredients of a disaster marathon.

We propose three outstanding features of the drama that were prominent in the coverage of September 11. All three fit the needs of the medium of television, the rules of the disaster marathon genre, and the hermeneutics of the story that the terrorists were able to spin.

1. Special Effects

The choice of targets meant maximizing the attack's visual impact, providing a long-term *salience* on television the world over. Television could not but hypnotize viewers by recycling and repeating the apocalyptic image of the falling towers, as in the most cliché vulgar Hollywood genre of horror movies come true. The havoc on the screen meant witnessing: (a) material damage, underscored by the physical collapse, which caused direct fear ('it could happen to me'); (b) human suffering, expressed by interviews with relatives, witnesses and firemen, even by unanswered voice-mail messages (mostly on the days after)—this exposure to emotional suffering exacerbated existential anxiety through empathy with the tragedy of other human beings; (c) the symbolic-semiotic aspects of witnessing the collapse of the Twin Towers, an emblem of America's spirit and achievement instantly transformed into punishable hubris.

It should be noted, however, that a fourth potential spectacle was not a major element in the broadcast of September 11. The sight of physical damage to humans—injured individuals in pain, deformed and mutilated bodies—was less prominent than the image of other events, such as the Oklahoma City or Columbine disasters. This was due to the overwhelming degree of material damage which tragically left relatively few injured and little of visible human remains. It also prevented the approach of TV crews. The relative invisibility and abstractness of human death (at least by the standard of disaster marathons) served in an inverted way to accentuate it by mystification, the surrealistic vanishing of the victims making the loss of life more difficult to come to terms with and more terrifying to imagine.[3] At the same time, this absence of human remains worked to focus attention on the mythological dimensions of the physical destruction and highlight its symbolic significance.

2. Temporal Effects

Whether the outcome of a carefully planned strategy or a contingency of operational constraints, the terrorists (and Bin Laden as the possible mastermind) managed to maintain long-term *exclusivity* on the television screen by carrying out a series of repetitious acts, spaced in time. This magnified the attacks' psychological effect by: (a) enhancing the visual impact of the second attack on the Twin Towers by having the cameras on the spot, ready for live broadcasting of the next attack; and (b) creating uncertainty about just how many attacks were imminent, and anxiety in anticipation of the unfolding of further attacks. The 'continuing' nature of the event also meant that the President and his people were kept busy not only with damage control but with apprehensively safeguarding themselves.

Consequently, the handiwork of the terrorists could rule supreme on the global stage, with the voice of a protagonist (from the public's point of view) badly missing. This void in contesting the dominance of the terrorists was underscored by the failure of Bush's first public response—agitated, un-spontaneous, and conspicuously transmitted from a hiding place. In contrast, the national rallying around New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani demonstrated just how crucial a solid performance of on-the-spot leadership could be in allaying fears of vulnerability and chaos.

3. Narrative Effects

In contrast to the visibility and colossal dimensions of the collapse of the buildings, it was precisely the enigmatic *invisibility* of the actors, and the lack of any coherent and/or explicit rationale, which clinched the media effectiveness of the attacks. Since the September 11 attacks were not aimed at striking a specific bargain, the real perpetrator had no need for immediate visibility nor to make demands. With no 'who' and 'why', only the what, when, and where, the narrative remained incomplete and therefore engrossing and tantalizing. This inexplicability and lack of closure enhanced the dependence on the media. Television was expected to come up with some answer. The engrossing effect of an unsolved mystery also foregrounded the media celebrations around the belated appearance of Bin Laden's video-tapes when he finally bragged about his supposed responsibility for the attacks. Here he leveraged the enigma of 'who' to captivate his audience with his own ideological narrative of 'why.'

Compared to the story of classic terrorism which plays out as a melodrama featuring villains creating harm, and heroes prevailing by addressing the damage, the days after the attacks played out as a mystery story, in which the villain still had to be detected. There is nothing like 'unfinished business' to keep TV audiences glued to the set, and nothing like invisibility and inscrutability to give them the notion they are viewing, or rather participating in, a thriller with ghostly overtones.

Lessons: Remedies for the Future

Preventing the full and prompt reporting of contemporary terrorist attacks from deteriorating into disaster marathons is probably unrealistic. Yet some aspects of media routines which help turn such attacks into terrorist-instigated media events, may yet be modified to diminish terrorist control. Possible courses of action may include the following.

(a) As part of crisis-handling routines, a central person in the government should be assigned the role of spokesperson to the media so as not to abandon the stage to the terrorists. Similarly, for in-depth coverage, knowledgeable officials can be earmarked to provide authoritative information inasmuch as media customarily turn to government for information and opinion in its routine,[4] and particularly so in times of crisis. Only as a second choice do the media resort to self-proclaimed experts, who are prone to spread disinformation and speculation.

(b) Decide on a policy of reserve with respect to providing gory pictures of damage, voices of hysterical witnesses, close-ups of mutilated bodies, and the injured in their pain. (While as noted, the latter images were to an extent

avoided this time due to the nature of the attack and the physical difficulties in close-up coverage, this is by no way assured in the eventuality of future attacks.) Such images induce panic and perhaps incite racial bias. Since the coverage is live, it addresses the public at the moments when viewers are most agitated and vulnerable. Exacerbating the intense emotions of the moment may produce severe undesirable effects.

(c) Do not give free air-time to the terrorists, as was done with Bin Laden's pronouncements broadcast by Al-Gezzira. News value and journalistic standards have to be carefully re-evaluated and redefined, so that sealed, oracular statements, from a speaker who rejects mediation in delivering his message, are not considered within the rules of free, responsive, and responsible broadcasting.

We do not necessarily endorse these possible remedies on ideological grounds, yet we believe that professional soul-searching and public debate on the proper standards for broadcasting disaster marathons are needed. The goal should be strategies that would diminish the incentives for the ruthless to engage in violence in order to reap the fruits of media coverage—the very media that must remain free in order to sustain life, liberty, and happiness.[5]

Discussion: When Television's Coverage of an Event Becomes Part of the Event

Television's coverage of the events of September 11 was a prominent example of its power to engage in 'the live broadcast of history'.[6] It also demonstrated the increasing difficulty in distinguishing between television's coverage of an event and its becoming part of it. The medium's predominance in public drama of such magnitude should be seen in the context of electronic journalism's adoption of the live coverage format, which positions it in the intersecting roles of story teller, negotiator, and movable stage on which the drama is played out. This development has nurtured two overlapping genres of live broadcasting: first the media event, featuring the deliberate staging and dramatic coverage of pre-planned symbol-laden moments in the social process,[7] then its sequel, the disaster marathon, featuring the live broadcast of catastrophe—natural, accidental, or meditated—and its aftermath.[8]

In both genres television interrupts its routine, switches into live broadcasting, and whole societies sit about glued to the screen for long hours, sometimes for days. As Dayan and Katz suggest with regard to media events, television's intervention in what are perceived as great moments in history, produces an experience in which private and public become one. At such historical moments television moves from its presence as noisy wallpaper to center stage in the home and in society, allowing individuals to stay in touch with the collectivity. In media events, journalists cooperate with the powers that be to enhance the festive spirit or the performative significance of the event. Coming close to the collusion of journalists in non-democratic states, media journalists in the West chose to become part of a tri-partite covenant with the initiators of the event and the public.

Both media events and disaster marathons draw active, socially involved audiences, and, in the case of disaster anxious and vulnerable ones, keeping them riveted to the screen. Unlike previous audiences, the audience of September 11 may have been zapping among globalized channels only to find the same recycled footage and sound-bytes, introduced by different anchors bearing identically severe

expressions. But there are also significant dissimilarities between the genres. The most telling is that whereas media events are carefully pre-planned, in disaster marathons television is not pre-warned, and in most cases cannot fathom that it could happen.[9] This element of surprise, inherent in disaster marathons, underscores its diametrically opposite relationship with the establishment. If in media events the political establishment takes over the media and the public, during disasters forces external to the political establishment capture the attention of media and public.

In the case of natural disaster or of technological collapse, the event is arbitrary and not purposive. In the case of man-made disruption of order or radical institutional change, however, there is human motivation and a mastermind launching the drama. Moreover, the instigators of the disaster may well have the *modus operandi* of journalists in mind, and they may factor it into their plan of action. What we get in such cases is not very different from a media event, although one turned on its head: normative society's disaster marathon is the terrorists' media event. The perpetrator of the disaster, as in a media event, pre-plans the staging of the dramatic moment. The public's engrossment and participation are assured, and media's cooperation, although not amicably pre-arranged, can be counted on. Television is sure to play its role in this subverted triangular covenant with the stagers and the public, celebrating disruption rather than integration.

Perpetrators can control not only the staging of what is in effect a co-opted media event, they can also send a message by manipulating the structure and normative constraints of media's inevitable disaster marathon, either deliberately or inadvertently. In the disaster marathon routine, once television's news editors are pushed to open-ended live coverage, they discover they have no 'script.' Large-scale disasters have no ascribed symbolic closure: their broadcast cannot resonate with a salient, integrative, social credo, nor provide either immediate or long-term solutions. Their script, in effect, comes under the control of the perpetrators. The chaotic, improvised nature of the disaster marathon telecast amplifies the terrorists' intent to produce uncertainty, instability, and anxiety.

An attack of the magnitude of September 11 signifies that things are out of control. It happened and was made public against government's interest, making leadership look vulnerable; and it supplies journalists with a crack (in this case a collapse) through which to peer through the fa ade. Journalists at such situations seem at their most powerful;[10] but, paradoxically, TV journalists are allocated this power under conditions that make responsible journalism all but impossible. These conditions, in effect, can put television in the position of an inadvertent accomplice of the perpetrators.

In recent years, we are increasingly witness to anti-normative acts that rather than shying away from publicity are manufactured precisely for that purpose. However, there may be differences as to the newsmaker's interest to disclose his identity in such cases. In 'classic' terror, the perpetrators use both the publicity of their actions and the disclosure of their identity for their cause. Bin Laden, and McVey before him, fill in a different cell in the publicity/identity matrix: publicity is a central element of their acts, but their identity is not disclosed. It is precisely this reticence in disclosing identity that adds tremendous power and unique dimensions to the inevitable disaster marathon, as described above. In fact, anonymity was a crucial aspect shaping television's coverage of the events of September 11.

The attack of September 11 was a statement larger than life, open-ended, motivated by deep frustration, one that could only be addressed in the time-span of

decades or generations. The magnitude of the claim, the impossibility of translating it into some form of immediate redress, and the notion of a globally spread network of perpetrators acting in the name of millions, was congruent to the invisibility and lack of identification of the attackers. The sinister anonymity of the perpetrators, moving the story from painful melodrama to a mystery thriller, injected suspense and foreboding to the painful collective experience of viewing it on television.

Notes and References

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