

WE DON'T MAKE THE NEWS, WE JUST REPORT IT: TELEVISION JOURNALISM AND NARRATIVES OF TRAUMA

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Introduction

Journalists are only too familiar with narrative elements that give form, structure and emotional resonance to the news: victims, villains and heroes, death and destruction, redemption, reconciliation, in short, the traumas of our individual and collective lives. Journalists assess all manner of events for their dramatic potential and hence for their audience impact. In an era of shrinking advertising revenues and eroding readership and ratings, deciding which narratives to develop is an art form at which journalists must become quickly adept if they are to succeed in a business increasingly shaped by the bottom line. Traumatic stories —wars, manmade and natural disasters, acts of violence and terror— offer emotional potential that is not typically matched by legislative sessions, trade deficits or the latest statistics on gross national production. Journalists favor events that have the elements of strong narrative because these are what people watch and remember. Often called the first rough draft of history, journalism shapes both our initial perceptions of events and our collective memories of them as well.

The news narrative, like its counterparts in literature, film and the arts, is a construction. It gives material form to events and experiences. Journalists shape narratives through their selection of what to cover, their use of language and images, through repetition, placement, juxtaposition and volume; they embellish

stories with experts and witnesses as well as with music tracks, montages, slow-motion, computer generated images and other special effects. Professional codes and practices, competition, technologies, audience demographics, and ratings all come into play as narratives are processed and produced, but the project for the contemporary journalist is first and foremost the compelling story.

While the need to know is the *raison d'être* of the journalists, the need to deny is perhaps less obvious but also pervasive, starting with the frequent need to deny their own agency, as our title suggests. In this paper, we take as examples some of the most heavily produced and reported trauma stories of the last decade to illustrate the competing needs of knowing and denying knowledge. The focus is on U.S. journalism because it is a highly influential model providing English language content used around the globe and because it draws heavily on established narrative conventions in both literature and film. Our analysis demonstrates that journalistic needs for knowledge and denial are both cultural and structural and the implications of this on collective and personal memory of traumas are profound.

Constructions of Memory

Writing in *How Societies Remember*, Connerton (1989: 39) notes that “to study the social formation of memory is to study those acts of transfer that make remembering in common possible”. Rather than existing solely within the individual or in the past, scholarly inquiry into memory situates both memory and trauma as profoundly social phenomena that exist as a result of construction in the present. Memory, in other words, requires those whom Connerton (1989: 76) refers to as the “custodians of memory” —the agents charged with recollective performances— to chronicle happenings that create and maintain the communal memory.

It is through this telling and sharing that memories gain their meaning. Lewis A. Coser, commenting on Maurice Halbwachs’ “pathbreaking” work on collective memory, suggests these inquiries into memory are part of a larger body of work in the “sociology of knowledge”, requiring an examination of how social processes operate to construct and maintain our beliefs and understandings of traumatic events and their memory (Halbwachs 1992: 1, 21). In this understanding of remembrance and trauma, memory transforms from a psychological concept to a sociological one, with communication becoming central to our understanding (Edy 1999: 72).

In this view, memory emerges as a highly contextual “process” rather than a “thing” (Olick and Robbins 1998: 122). Identity, trauma and memory connect under these questions of process, with the construction of narrative playing a

decisive role —the field of cultural memory is, as other scholars note, a space of struggle, where “people and groups fight hard for their stories” (Olick and Robbins 1998: 126). In this contestation, narratives can become assertions of power, with certain memories coming to dominate. Importantly, the construction of trauma and collective memory is a process often marked by struggle, and it is communication that plays the pivotal role in determining how trauma and memory are constructed and maintained.

Collective Trauma

In its original usage, the term “trauma” refers to a wound inflicted upon the body (Caruth 1996: 3). Later psychological literature came to grapple with how minds, like bodies, could also be injured. In speaking of collective trauma, there is an implicit belief in much of the later literature that the community exists as something distinct from a collection of individuals. This creates an important marker for understanding how we recognize the victims of trauma. This larger notion of community elevates us beyond viewing a collectivity as merely an amassed group of individuals, drawing greater attention to how communal bodies can be traumatized. As Kai Erikson (1995: 185) explains, the community is something tangible that “can be damaged in much the same way as the tissues of mind and body”. Methodologically, this theoretical underpinning lends itself to an approach that analyzes the way communities, as entities themselves, are understood to function and what happens when the community is threatened. This helps explain how events that might only superficially influence individuals, can come to be designated as traumas for a community. As will be discussed further, today’s news media in particular play a vital role in this definitional process.

Both individually and collectively, traumas are often understood as a “response to abrupt change” (Alexander 2004: 3). Jeffrey C. Alexander (2004: 1) defines cultural trauma as occurring “when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways”. Likewise, Arthur Neal envisions national traumas as reactions to explosive, cataclysmic, “volcano-like events” that shake the foundations of a society and compel an emotional response (Alexander 2004: 3). The September 11, 2001, attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C., are an obvious example of this for Americans, as is the devastation wreaked by Hurricane Katrina on the city of New Orleans. School shootings are devastating for the local communities in which they occur, but they can also affect distant communities, as was the case with the murders at Virginia Tech University in the small town of Blacksburg, Virginia.

Trauma can also be a response to ongoing conditions such as poverty, lack of medical care or access to education. While there are certain characteristics that underpin the study of all cultural trauma, each is a product of a particular set of meanings and beliefs that are socially situated in a particular place and time, it is impossible to clearly delineate the full scope of events or situations that might constitute a collective trauma.

Many trauma theorists have argued that no events are “inherently traumatic” (Alexander 2004: 8). Events do not constitute trauma. Rather, it is what events precipitate—the creation of meanings through which we interpret events—that “provide the sense of shock and fear” that we characterize as traumatic (Alexander 2004: 10). Cultural trauma, if we believe it to be socially constructed, is predicated on the *belief* that an event or condition is harmful or threatening. A definition of cultural trauma thus hinges on a perception within a collective of a shared experience (past or present) of suffering. This, in turn, raises questions about the social processes that create these beliefs, suggesting a necessary focus on how trauma comes to be represented. Implicit in this approach is a belief that culture is constituted, at least in part, by “patterns of publicly available symbols objectified in society” (Olick 1999: 336). If, like Alexander (2004), we understand trauma as something that is not necessarily “naturally existing”, but, rather, “something constructed by society”, then media become a powerful force in understanding how it is that traumas and the memories surrounding them are created, maintained and understood.

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Even if we believe, as some psychoanalytic approaches suggest, that there are events or situations that are more typically traumatic than others, there is a social element to understanding how it is that these events and situations come to have their power and influence. Not surprisingly, this idea takes on increased importance when speaking about cultural traumas. The notion of what a culture is or should be is socially determined and, in many cases, contested. Therefore, what it takes to “injure” or “traumatize” a culture is often subject to debate. This takes on particular importance in understanding constructions of trauma and memory in societies. Whether we are looking at “The Troubles” in Northern Ireland, apartheid in South Africa or the abortion debate in the United States, we can identify pronounced cultural struggles and claims to victimization that are continually contested in both public and private ways. Meanings are far from static and are constantly being renegotiated, which suggests a need to root our definitions of trauma in the social reactions to events and situations, rather than the situations and events themselves. In this case, memory of past discrimination, struggle, or violence becomes a crucial part of the manner in which we define what it means to be a traumatized society or culture.

Media and the Role of Narrative

If cultural traumas are not natural events occurring, but instead the result of social construction, it is through communication that certain events come to be designated as traumatic and certain people come to be regarded as victims of trauma. Through this “trauma process”, “agents” of the collectivity (rather than the collectivity as whole) work to define and represent trauma in particular ways (Alexander 2004: 11). The process of memory and trauma construction is an exercise in representation and thus the constructed or mediated text is highly relevant. Journalists participate in this process in at least two interconnected ways: first, by providing a medium through which agents of the collectivity can speak as authorized sources and second by acting as agents of the collectivity themselves.

Even more crucially, the narratives that journalists create about trauma often define and explain events in ways that resonate with audiences. As Connerton (1989: 76) notes, to ensure repetition over time recollections often rely on a “standardized form” of storytelling. Central to this form is the demand for coherence to create a meaningful narrative about the trauma that offers definition, context and explanations of responsibility and causality, while also providing resonance and fostering identification with the victims of trauma. Importantly, news reports (especially journalistic coverage of events designated as traumatic), often display many of the hallmarks of narrative, making journalists ideally situated to participate in the “trauma process”.

As noted, news is largely a process of making meaning, with the journalist at the center, cobbling facts together into a cohesive and compelling narrative that “informs” members of audiences. This practice goes beyond the mere recounting of facts and descriptions of events. In a very concrete way, “the reporter’s job”, Schudson (2003: 177) writes, “is to make meaning”. Additionally, the journalist as storyteller deals in “magic” and mystery, using cause-and-effect scenarios to offer explanations to traumatic forces seemingly outside of human control (29). It is, as Schudson (2003: 177) and others observe, not about a “sum of facts”, but about the “relationship” among facts. In this shaping of facts as a process of meaning-making, journalists rely on a variety of narrative and reporting conventions, encompassing sourcing, structuring and news values. Steve M. Barkin, in the 1984 article “The Journalist as Storyteller: An Interdisciplinary Perspective”, writes the journalist as storyteller is often criticized for not adhering to standards of objectivity, seduced by drama and forsaking the truth. Yet, Barkin (1984: 28) argues, the storytelling aspect of journalism performs an important “cultural function”, making news accessible and “[linking] people together by stressing that which was common to all”. The ultimate goal is audience comprehension, which comes through dramatization.

Likewise, in their 1988 study of news narrative, S. Elizabeth Bird and Robert W. Dardenne (1988: 67, 70) explore news as a “symbolic system” that moves beyond informing to a more communal role of providing solutions to problems and offering “reassurance and familiarity”. In turn, news media provide information encoded with meanings, moral values and standards. “In newsmaking [...] it is in their power to place people and events into the existing categories of hero, villain, good and bad, thus to invest their stories with the authority of mythological truth”, Bird and Dardenne write (1988: 80). By establishing themselves as storytellers, journalists can influence a community’s perception of its past—both defining who is part of a collective and contributing to the process of learning from significant events (Edy 1999). This is particularly true in stories focusing on major historical moments, which require that memories not be treated as mere fragments, but rather that they are be placed on a continuum and layered together to form a cohesive and meaningful narrative that propels the past into the present (Connerton 1989). The events of September 11, 2001 provide an obvious case in point.

Day of Heroes and Villains

Television was still the medium of choice for most Americans on the day of attacks. Live coverage, uninterrupted by commercials, drew huge audiences. The images they saw and the stories they heard varied in only minor ways from network to network. The narratives of 9/11, perhaps not surprisingly, relied on constructions of good and evil, heroes and villains, innocence and loss—all of which resonated with the American audience and also provided familiar frames within which specific events could be organized and recounted.

American journalists were given high praise for their round-the-clock reporting in a historical moment where the need to know was urgent. But from the very early television news reports on the 9/11 attacks, a pro-American bias was right there on the TV screen, signaled visually in countless ways, starting with the sudden proliferation of American flags on the lapels of reporters from American cities around the country. Graphic titles, which have become such a ubiquitous feature of television news reporting, appeared within hours and provided labels which branded the 9/11 story and gave viewers a constant reminder of what mental frame they should use when taking in details of the story. “Attack on America” was one of the first labels to appear, and it was soon followed by “America on Alert” and later, “America Strikes Back”.

Even seasoned network anchors were caught up in the emotions of the story. NBC’s Tom Brokaw choked up during a newscast when he was describing an

image of three firefighters lifting an American flag over Ground Zero. After pausing to regain his composure, he told his audience: "I'm sorry, I was caught unexpectedly emotional in that moment as I saw that flag" (television broadcast 2001). Critics noted that "anchors and correspondents have not hesitated to conduct the post attack coverage primarily through the viewpoint of the United States. Use of the pronouns 'our' and 'us' have been commonplace" (Rutenberg and Carter 2001).

In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, American journalists policed each other to assure conformity in the ranks. ABC News President Av Westin was furiously attacked for saying he did not have an opinion as to whether the Pentagon was a legitimate military target. *The New York Post* responded with a blistering editorial: "He's not about to make a judgment that the murder of scores of Americans without provocation or warning is essentially wrong [...]. Is he for real?" (*New York Post* 2001: 36). The next day Westin publicly apologized, saying, "I was wrong. Under any interpretation, the attack on the Pentagon was criminal and entirely without justification" (Moritz 199).

Patriotism was on visual display from the first day of coverage with emotionally charged video montages of the American flag, the Statue of Liberty, the President at Ground Zero and makeshift memorials that had sprung up around New York and Washington. These layers of images were typically combined with plaintive music tracks and chants of "USA, USA, USA". Lest anyone forget even momentarily the triggering events of the story, shots of the planes, the towers engulfed in flames and the buildings collapsing into rubble and dust were repeated so frequently that audience members complained that it was too much. Within a matter of days, the networks agreed to limit their use of the Twin Tower footage, although by that time the images had been burned into the mind's eye of anyone who had been watching.

With slogans like "We report, you decide" television networks assert their autonomy and attempt to deny their agency in shaping public perceptions of geo-political events like 9/11. In the aftermath of the attacks, to take just one example, MSNBC created a promotional piece showing a full screen text (below) superimposed over images from the World Trade Center and the Statue of Liberty and scored with an evocative music track.

Who Did This?
How Did They Do It?
What Will America Do?
How Will America Change?
We Know You Have Questions
We Will Continue to Bring You the Whole Picture

The ethnocentric text inherently contradicts the promise of comprehensive reporting on the “whole picture” and is an example of how U.S. journalists attempted to be both independent and patriotic at the same time. News institutions seemed torn between dual allegiances to professional standards of objectivity and to private notions of patriotism. Debates about the appropriate role of news media in the crisis came amid concerns about the ethics of television anchors wearing flag pins and labeling the hijackers as “terrorists”. As Dennis D. Cali (2002: 290) noted, many journalists in the wake of September 11 abandoned traditional notions of objectivity and balance, focusing instead on community unification. Community in this case meant the entire country. And unity more often than not translated into a general reluctance to question responses advocated by the Bush administration not just for weeks but for years following the event.

Journalistic authority rests on an ability to take complex situations and explain them in narratives that resonate with their particular audiences. The struggle to do so effectively can be pronounced when reporting on cultural conflicts and traumas that are imbued with tremendous emotion and often defy easy explanation or categorization. In these situations, journalists typically simplify complex issues and in so doing ignore and thus implicitly deny those story threads that do not easily weave into an overarching story line.

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In one sense, this is structural. In the case of television, the contemporary American nightly newscast is typically 30 minutes long, including eight minutes of commercials. In an effort to provide an appealing mix of content, producers are required to keep story counts high: shows with 10 or 12 different stories are preferable to ones with four or five. As a result, field reports from the White House, Congress, foreign bureaus or battlefields are kept brief—two minutes or less. These structural realities translate into time limitations for television and radio and space limitations for newspapers. Headlines have to capture even lengthy reports in a few words, and in so doing they frame what follows for both casual and careful readers. Dramatic photos often accompany front page stories, further directing and narrowing reader perceptions.

In another sense, simplification is cultural. Carolyn Kitch (2003: 213) notes that American news coverage in the immediate aftermath of September 11 largely reflected “elements of a funeral ritual, creating a forum for national mourning”. It was through “closure” journalism—replacing “vulnerability and fear” with “heroism and patriotic pride”—that journalists forged a narrative that established a predominant collective memory and, in turn, a seemingly unified national community (2003: 213).

A central concern among many scholars of memory is the way in which the past is used to offer solutions to problems and naturalize certain courses of future action.

The news narratives of 9/11, constructed so solidly around longstanding anti-Muslim and anti-Arab stereotypes, provided a powerful touchstone in the political arena where the attacks were continually recalled in an effort to bolster public support for the invasion of Iraq 18 months later. Mainstream American media were frozen in a cultural moment. Despite evidence that Iraqis were not responsible for the 9/11 attacks, news organizations failed to aggressively question the Bush administration's policies until long after the U.S. was deeply entrenched in its military campaign. Writing in the alternative *Boston Phoenix*, Mark Jurkowitz (2005) noted belated "*mea culpas* from outlets such as *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*" for what he described as the "dismal failure to scrutinize the White House's faulty WMD rationale for going to war in Iraq". Many noted that in the aftermath of 9/11, U.S. journalists had relinquished the role of watchdog and adopted the role of lapdog. This was a role they arguably did not return to until the catastrophic government failures in response to Hurricane Katrina in August 2005.

Katrina Coverage

News coverage of Hurricane Katrina was hailed as a turning point in American journalism by columnists, critics, academics and ethicists alike. Writing for Reuters, Steve Gorman (2005) applauded "a sense of outrage and antagonism many thought had long gone out of fashion in broadcast journalism". Katrina reporting, Gorman noted, was a distinct "departure from what some regard as overly deferential treatment of US political leaders in the wake of the September 11 attacks on America" (2005, n.p.). *New York Times* media critic David Carr was grateful to see once again "the kind of anger that has been mostly missing from a toothless press. After a couple of years on the run from the government, public skepticism and self-inflicted wounds, the press corps felt its toes touch bottom in the Gulf Coast and came up big". (David Carr 2005, n.p.) Op-ed columnist Eric Deggans (2005) described "a pointed turn in news coverage which has found journalists consistently challenging officials —often with undisguised emotion— on bungled relief efforts " (2005, n.p.).

While there was much to be applauded in the coverage, Katrina narratives also underscored the double standards that apply in the American press when it comes to the often-intertwined issues of race and class. Jurkowitz called it "one of journalism's finest moments in recent memory", but nonetheless concluded that the coverage in mainstream media "reinforced the notion that our society is deeply divided by color and money" (2005, n.p.).

While journalists speak of serving all segments of society, White perspectives typically dominate U.S. news narratives. Mainstream media is by, for and about the White,

economically advantaged and educated. Newsrooms both local and national marginalize communities of color and ignore poor people and the neighborhoods in which they live. In the commercial environment that defines American media, content is aimed at those demographic groups who are sufficiently affluent to buy the products whose advertisements pay the freight. News stories based on all kinds of merchandise —iPods, computers, cars, wines, restaurants, stocks, bonds, Hollywood celebrities and professional athletes— are common. But stories of inner city or rural poverty are not typically part of the daily news agenda. One of the more shocking aspects of the Katrina coverage was how few Americans were aware of the degraded conditions in which many New Orleans residents had been living. As the Black actor Danny Glover noted during a benefit performance for New Orleans residents, “When the hurricane struck, it did not turn [(the Gulf Coast)] into a third-world country. It revealed one”. (In “Stars Slate Bush at Relief Event”, 2005).

With a major national story emanating from a Black majority city such as New Orleans, the double standard was indeed all the more striking. A case in point that appeared early in the coverage and went viral on the Internet: the now infamous two-photo incident. Two almost identical images of residents trying to escape the flood waters moved on the news wire services within hours of each other, but with notably different captions. Both photos showed teenagers wading in chest high water carrying food. But the caption for the Black teenager referred to him as a looter, while the caption with for the White teens described them as finding the food they were carrying. Asked whether this example was an anomaly or a real reflection of media bias, a CNN producer said that it was unquestionably the former: “In the huge amount of coverage that was made, you were bound to find that. I can guarantee that there was a photo which had a caption that Black people were foraging and there was probably some video showing that some White people were looting” (Blake, personal interview). But a research study that examined more than one thousand of the Katrina photos that appeared in *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today* and *The Washington Post* reached a different conclusion. Overwhelmingly, the study showed, Blacks and Whites were depicted in decidedly different roles. Specifically, Blacks were shown as passive and being rescued while Whites were shown in active roles as rescuers, relief workers and soldiers. Additionally, the study demonstrated that when photos depicted looting, in 83% of the cases, African Americans were pictured. When photos depicted people guarding their property, Whites were in those pictures 66% of the time (Kahle, Yu and Whiteside 2007: 75-89).

On the streets of New Orleans this came as no surprise. Interviewees for a NSF project that Moritz conducted consistently pointed to media bias in the Katrina coverage. Elizabeth Allen, herself a Black relief worker from Michigan, said that although Blacks were clearly a part of relief efforts, their stories were not

prominently featured in the news. "When it comes to helping [...] you never see Blacks, you only see Whites, you only see Caucasians, you see maybe a few Hispanics, but no African Americans" (Elizabeth Allen, personal interview: 2005). Patricia Raybon, an African American author, similarly said that she "didn't learn how African American churches are helping Katrina evacuees by reading the newspaper, but by reading e-mail updates from my church in Denver". While there were numerous media stories about Tulane and Loyola universities being forced to close their campuses because of flood damage, Black schools did not receive the same attention. Said Raybon: "I had to search blacknews.com to learn the fate of Xavier University, the historically Black college in New Orleans that has successfully prepared more Black undergrads for medical school than any other academic program in the nation" (Patricia Raybon, personal correspondence: 2005).

Blacks who weren't shown as impoverished victims of the storm were often presented as criminals. Black residents of New Orleans again noted disparities in the coverage of crime, saying in interviews that news reports focused on Black crime only and offered exaggerated coverage.

The media focused on poor people, the uneducated. They played up Black crime [...] you hear them say things like, "a group of Black males went down and broke in". When in actuality, they were of all creeds and colors. Some were saying that they were breaking in for survival, now I'm not excusing the people that were breaking in, stealing and robbing other people's homes. I don't uphold doing wrong but when you catch people that are put out on a limb and trying to survive, we didn't see a problem with that, but in the media, they [didn't give] the whole story: it wasn't just Blacks doing it, it was other people too. (Patricia Lucky, personal interview: 2005)

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During the height of the disaster, descriptions of rape, murder and chaos at the Superdome and Convention Center were repeatedly highlighted in both live coverage and printed reports. But in reviewing their coverage, some major news organizations were unable to actually verify the accuracy of what they had repeated so often. *The New Orleans Times-Picayune* was the first to offer a major correction.

Even in our own pages, sometimes in stories that I wrote, we reported things that we got from other sources and when we went back to look they had turned out not to be true or had not been substantiated. And I think that was a good example of the media taking responsibility and going back to correct the story and I would include the national media in that. (Brian Thevenot, personal interview: 2005)

And, indeed, similar stories aimed at correcting the record were done by *CNN*, *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times*. The difficulties with media corrections are at least twofold: first, corrections typically are given less space or airtime than the original reporting, and second, by the time corrections are offered,

audiences have fallen substantially. In this sense it is often an impossible task to completely call back the information given in the original story or to change the first impression made on readers and viewers.

Hiring policies

Racial and gender diversity in newsrooms has a profound impact on content. In terms of national numbers, newsrooms are more diverse than they were several decades ago but African Americans are still an under-represented group. Despite industry attempts to diversify, employment in broadcast and newspaper newsrooms in the United States continues to be dominated by Whites. A program initiated in 1978 by the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) to achieve racial parity in relation to each community's population by the year 2000 has not come close to meeting its goals. ASNE was so far from hitting its own employment benchmarks that it moved its parity target date forward by a quarter century to 2025. Meantime, especially in an era of shrinking revenues and newspaper closings, the numbers continue to dwindle. ASNE's 2005 report noted that the "share of journalism jobs held by non-whites has receded from its high-water mark in most newsrooms, large and small" (ASNE Survey 2005). Two years later, writing for the on-line news industry magazine *ScrippsNews*, Tracie Morales and Charlie Ericksen (2007) concluded that the "record is about as bad as it gets. Persons of color now make up a third of this nation's population, but less than 14% of the news staffs on ASNE member publications".

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The situation in radio and television is somewhat similar. According to the annual survey of broadcast newsrooms conducted by the Radio and Television News Directors Association (RTNDA), employment of non-whites in broadcast television was 23% in 2008 while the overall non-white population stood at 34%. African Americans account for about 10% of the non-whites working in television, but at the management level, they account for only 3.7% of television news directors. Heavier representations are seen in positions such as videographer and video editor. The RTNDA survey shows that the picture for non-whites in radio broadcasting is "even bleaker, with Caucasian employment having gone up from 85.3% in 1995 to 92.1% in 2005. In the same time period, African American numbers have plummeted: in 1995 Blacks made up 5.7% of radio broadcasting staff; in 2005, their numbers were less than 1%, at 0.7%". The number of all-white newsrooms in the United States stood at 37% (or 346 newsrooms), according to ASNE figures.

Nonetheless, one might expect that in New Orleans, a Black majority city, African American journalists would have a significant presence in local newsrooms. This does

not turn out to be the case at the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, the city's daily newspaper where 2004 was the peak year for hiring non-whites, who accounted for 17.1% of the newsrooms population. Even at its peak, the percentage of non-white staff was still very low when considering the paper's readership, which in 2004 was 43.6% non-white. So, while the circulation area for *The Times-Picayune* shows that almost half of the population is non-white, the employment figures of non-whites at the paper make up less than one-fifth of the newsroom. In comparative terms, the New Orleans daily paper was nearly at the bottom in its circulation category (250,000-500,000) for non-white hires (Dedman and Doig 2005).

CNN, with headquarters in Atlanta, might also be expected to have a diverse newsroom, but employees described a White male power structure that dominates the newsroom culture.

CNN at the higher echelons is a mainly male institution. At the middle-to-upper management, there are a significant number of female producers. The weekend seems to be produced entirely by woman [...]. For the prime-time shows, all the executive producers are men. And I do think it makes a difference. (B. Blake, CNN field producer, personal interview: 2006)

This overall lack of racial diversity among newsroom personnel suggests that a White perspective controlled the selection, framing and presentation of Katrina coverage. Nonetheless, news organizations try hard to look as though they provide diversity. CNN, for example, had an African American correspondent in New Orleans and considered that a major advantage. But having Black talent on the air may not have any fundamental impact on how the story is covered:

Just because he is Black, it doesn't mean he understands these poor Black communities. But there is a credibility issue there. When he stands up and says it, it's harder to call him racist. It's easier to call it as just a misunderstanding. And I think that the advantage of having a Black correspondent is that people who would want to criticize you for your coverage can't use the word "racist" as easily. (B. Blake, CNN field producer, personal interview: 2006)

Even in this era of niche marketing, with cable channels devoted to specialized programming focused on food, decorating, gardening, sports, travel, and news, there is no Black news network. Spanish language news is available in many US markets through Telemundo and Univision, but BET, Black Entertainment Television, does not offer significant news coverage. African American viewers must rely on the major broadcast and cable news channels, still the only ones with the infrastructure to cover major national or international stories, for their accounting of the day's events. This is essentially the case for most non-white viewers, and it has significant consequences. The coverage of the school shootings at Virginia Tech University offers a case in point.

Virginia Tech and Representations of Race

A decisive feature of racial oppression in the United States has been the elaboration of an ideology of difference or otherness that often manifests itself in narrative constructions based on binaries such as “us” and “them” with “us” referring to White America and “them” to any other racial or ethnic group. This construction is also used to differentiate straights from gays and, as noted during the 9/11 coverage, Americans from other national groups. Omi (1989: 112) describes the importance of popular culture in shaping “the overall racial climate” in American society. He singles out visual media —namely film and television— for being

[...] notorious in disseminating images of racial minorities which establish for audiences what these groups look like, how they behave and, in essence, “who they are”. The power of the media lies not only in their ability to reflect the dominant racial ideology, but in their capacity to shape that ideology in the first place. (1989: 115)

Similarly, Hall (1981: 34-35) argues that a “racist ‘common sense’ has become pervasive” in Western societies, shaped primarily through media “images, descriptions, explanations and frames for understanding how the world is and why it works as it is said and shown to work”. Far from having a critical stance toward race, the media create and typically accept racial otherness, “taking it as their base-line without questioning it” (1981: 28).

The otherness frame was particularly evident in the treatment of Seung-Hui Cho, the Virginia Tech student who murdered 32 people on the university campus before taking his own life. Cho was first identified by police in a news conference the day after the shootings as a “23-year-old South Korean here in the US as a resident alien”. That label was picked up by reporters and re-circulated countless times, a fact that was noted by others of South Korean origin writing in blog posts and discussion groups. One example reads as follows:

Am I wrong to be incensed that there is constant emphasis on the fact that the gunman in the VA Tech shootings is South Korean? I don’t think his race gives any insight into this tragedy. But every single article I read has to point out that he is a South Korean resident alien. There has been enough emphasis on his resident alien status that diplomats from South Korea feel compelled enough to travel to the site of the shooting and apologize on behalf of the country, as though South Korea itself was somehow involved. Perhaps I’m being a bit too sensitive. Since, you know, up until last June, I was a South Korean resident alien too. Although I’ve always identified myself as a Korean *American*, raised in Los Angeles. (“this little life of mine” April 18, 2007)

The journalism profession is replete with style guides and ethical codes that underscore the need to avoid racial identifiers unless they add something to a story’s content. The Asian American Journalists Association, highly aware of longstanding media stereotyping in depictions of Asians, issued an email alert on

the day of the shooting, pointing out the sensitivity of the situation and the need for fair and unbiased reporting. Specifically, they issued guidelines to all media to

avoid using racial identifiers unless there is a compelling or germane reason. There is no evidence at this early point that the race or ethnicity of the suspected gunman has anything to do with the incident, and to include such mention serves only to unfairly portray an entire people. The effect of mentioning race can be powerfully harmful. It can subject people to unfair treatment based simply on skin color and heritage. We further remind members of the media that the standards of news reporting should be universal and applied equally no matter the platform or medium, including blogs. (AAJA bulletin 2007)

As in the Katrina case, journalists covering Virginia Tech may deny racial bias and argue that standards were applied equally, but the audiences most sensitive to the issues saw it differently. South Korean students studying in the United States, for examples, voiced their opinions in on-line bulletin boards such as gohackers.com, where postings were typically written in Korean. Dozens of postings debated whether Cho—who arrived in the United States from Korea when he was eight years old—should be regarded as Korean or as American. “He grew up in America, so he’s American” was a typical comment. Students made repeated references and objections to the US media’s use of the phrase “resident alien”. As one posting stated, “they [the media] repeat ‘South Korea’ so many times. We need to worry about possible revenge”. Other posts said the preferred term is “permanent resident” (see full study at Moritz and Kwak 2008).

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Just prior to the shooting spree, Cho had recorded a videotape of himself in a rambling diatribe against society where he assumes various threatening poses holding handguns and knives. He sent the tape to NBC News on the day of the murders. After NBC aired segments of the video, extracted still images circulated and re-circulated on the Web within mere minutes. Korean student postings focused on fear of reprisals because of Cho’s ethnicity.

“It seems that this gave people all over the world fear or hostility toward Koreans”.

“Do I need to change my name? My name is similar to the shooter’s”.

“One good thing is that he didn’t speak Korean before the camera, and he didn’t say ‘You Americans’”.

“I hoped he had changed his name to Andy Cho or Mike Cho since he had lived in America for a long time”.

Another discussion criticized *The New York Times* web report for showing an image from the Korean film *Old Boy* and claiming that the movie provided Cho with inspiration. Students said it was more likely that Cho was motivated by American films like *The Terminator* or *Taxi Driver*. Posts criticized Japanese cartoons for being anti-Korean, YouTube’s display of *Old Boy*, and claims in Japanese media that

Korea is a murderous country. All of this fueled a sense of personal trauma for South Korean students.

“He [a neighbor] kept on asking our nationality [...] my wife is under severe stress”.

“I was hesitating [...] and I said I was Chinese”.

“An individual’s mistake is not the mistake of the community [...] [still] I cannot help but feel ashamed”.

As in the case of 9/11, people who were not central figures and who were quite distant from the physical location of the story nonetheless appear deeply affected by how the story was being framed generally and by how Cho was being labeled. In addition to repeated references to Cho as South Korean, his status as a “resident alien” was another frequently used identifier that came in for criticism for two reasons. First, it was another way of suggesting that Cho, who had moved with his family to the United States when he was eight years old, should not be viewed as an American. Second, the word “alien” conjures images of space creatures and, as such, was seen as a veiled way of conflating Asians and non-humans.

Conclusion

While some trauma literature (and much media coverage) emphasizes the “waves of good feelings” that follow catastrophes, this is not the universal experience. Class, ethnic, and racial divisions among others, constitute what Foner (2005: 7) calls the “terrain of disaster”, in which some groups are affected much more than others. After 9/11, for example, Muslims “were especially vulnerable. Of course, Muslims were not immune to stereotyping and discrimination before the attack” (Foner 2005: 14), but in the aftermath they “were seen as a threat to national security and targeted by a series of federal administrative measures” (Foner 2005: 14). These included detention, travel restrictions, registration regimens and FBI interviews. Muslims were also the victims of an anti-Muslim backlash, including hate crimes, street assaults, and verbal abuses.

Collective memory has always required custodians who protect, preserve, and perform recollections of significant events. In the electronic era, these performances are no longer typically face-to-face. Technologies now enable agents of the collective to reach a global audience and to create texts that remain perpetually accessible as “preserved communication” (Connerton 1989: 76). Through their capture in media, these become what Connerton (1989: 73) refers to as *inscriptions*, where “modern devices [...] trap and hold information, long after the human organism has stopped informing”. The memories preserved through inscriptions are notably different from the “live telling” because, among other things, they dramatically extend the reach of the community.

Texts that are inscribed in today's cultural memory have immense power both at their original moment of distribution, but more crucially, over time and space as they "transcend the social conditions of production and reception" (Connerton 1989: 96). In this sense, modern media technologies play a vital role in enhancing the performances of agents of the collectivity, even as they expand the number of agents able to participate in the recollection process. Archival interviews, still and moving images, soundtracks, headlines, analysis and commentary—all of which may not only reinforce memory but also reignite the trauma itself—are available in perpetuity thanks to Google, YouTube, Facebook and other file sharing and social networking systems.

These contemporary communication tools are dramatically changing the ways journalists collect and disseminate news. Reporters who work in print push material to websites for immediate publication. Deadlines are every minute and the next day's printed product is a now supplement to the real time stories and images that are hitting the Internet around the clock. Broadcast journalists who are used to being "live" at the scene are now competing to get material out as quickly as it gets to websites. In this environment, time for reflection is increasingly rare. As a result, accuracy, fairness, context may be further jeopardized—especially in the coverage of major breaking stories.

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While citizen journalism and the blogosphere are increasingly influential, professional news organizations still dominate the media landscape and in large measure determine how stories are framed. Many of the same issues that were problematic in the pre-web era remain contentious today. Journalists have been repeatedly criticized, for example, for being insensitive to issues of race and ethnicity which, whether articulated or not, remain powerful elements in shaping news narratives. Despite written guidelines, ombudsmen and other reform efforts, the framing of stories is still determined by the perspective of reporters in the field and editors in the newsroom. And, most typically in the United States, that perspective is dominated by a White world view. The repeated description of Cho in terms of his Korean ethnicity and his "resident alien" status, the visual references to the American flag and to Muslim stereotypes, and the exaggeration of and emphasis on Black crime and Black passivity during Hurricane Katrina coverage are all concrete examples of how this plays out in practice.

Audiences for stories involving major crisis and traumas are no longer typically local or even national. When major stories break now, they circulate around the globe in a matter of minutes, not days. Those stories are easily shared among audiences, especially those with access to digital news, whose perspectives may very much be at odds with the editors, reporters, producers and news executives who provide the coverage. Journalists today really are serving both a global audience and a local audience who live in diverse communities and remote locations. For them to serve

both groups well, it is increasingly important that news narratives be constructed and analyzed with a critical eye that recognizes the many communities impacted by them.

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