

Just as historical context within a story helps us to “make the world make sense,” as Robert Karl Manoff wrote, tracing the history or arc of a story also helps us make meaning of events. A study of media coverage of the terrorist attacks must necessarily take into account the patterns of coverage over time. How was Afghanistan reported prior to September 11? What themes, events, issues or people did the mass media tell us were newsworthy, and how has the focus changed since then? This is a story about terrorism and about the awful events of September 11; there can be little dispute of that. But women are a part of that story, too. Early coverage lifted the veil, so to speak: ongoing coverage of this major story must not obscure their presence now.

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Media in Crises: Gender and Terror, September 2001

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Instantly mobilizing and re-deploying resources of a media system, which had for more than a decade covered news primarily as entertainment, posed an overwhelming challenge to US media on September 11th. In effect, media had to reinvent themselves on the spot.

During the actual attacks, the camera functioned as witness. Television networks were criticized for their repetitive replay of the horrific images of the attack. Yet, the images were initially the message. There was an interpretive void: an invisible enemy had struck the iconic symbols of global capitalism and the US military in broad daylight. The national security lapse was so great that even President Bush and his entourage, in Florida at the time of the attacks, had to turn on the television to find out what had happened.¹

In the hours and days that immediately followed the attacks, the airways were saturated with attempts to make sense of the horrific events for a shocked nation. What was most notable about this early phase in the coverage, from a feminist perspective, was the virtual disappearance of women. Forced to improvise, the media regressed. Pearl Harbor became the salient analog for both government and media agenda setters, and with it, it seemed, sixty years of structural transformations in the US gender order, were for a time erased.

September 11th was a story about men, told by men using traditional masculinist narrative frames. All of the agents in this real-life action scenario were men: the perpetrators, the “heroes,” the firefighters and police personnel who died valiantly trying to save World Trade Center victims, and the political leaders who took charge of America’s response. All of the major television networks immediately put their long-time anchors on air for marathon coverage

of the crisis: father figures offering the nation reassurance by being reliably present. The on-camera experts, quickly recruited during the early hours of coverage, were old warhorses: retired generals and former cabinet members. Even Condoleeza Rice, the administration's National Security Advisor—presumably a key player in mediating this grave national security failure—was initially represented as a mute background figure in shots of Bush's cabinet.

The other apparent exception to this homosocial gender regime affirmed its valence. First Lady Laura Bush, who had a low profile before September 11th, became highly visible in the archetypal role of nurturer, compassionately tending to the nation's emotional neediness. Of her role, an historian offered the press this infantilizing explanation: "We react to a first lady the way react to our own mothers ... when the world blows up, she's the one we want."²

When more images of women reappeared on the screen later in the week, they were usually wives and children, survivors of the brave men, firefighters, and police officers buried beneath the rubble of the World Trade Center. To be sure, male victims and survivors were also represented, but most of the coverage, most of the time, represented men acting and women reacting. Heroes in New York, like heroes in Homeric myths, were, it seemed, by definition, brave men—men who took charge of the rescue and recovery, while women watched, waited, and emoted.³

Television coverage did, however, break with the routine conventions for representing hegemonic masculinity by showing "manly men"—from the President to firefighters, rescue workers, and even one corporate CEO—crying.⁴ This departure, like the tears themselves, underscored the profound gravity of the crisis.

CNN's decision to broadcast Saira Shah's documentary *Behind the Veil* also broke with normal television programming practices both in form (repeat broadcasts in short time intervals of a grainy, low-budget, independently produced documentary) and content (revolutionary feminism). Prior to September 11th, feminists tried, without success, to attract mainstream media attention to the plight of women under the Taliban. Indeed Western media had devoted much more attention to the Taliban's destruction of Buddhist statues than to the mass rapes and executions of Afghan women. Broadcast of the documentary was therefore a positive development *per se*, although CNN's programming decision was probably made despite the feminist message, not because of it. Because CNN had framed its coverage under the logo "America's New War," Shah's documentary provided the cable network with a "scoop" of sorts. It made the invisible enemy visible at a time when US media, like US intelligence agencies, had little information. Moreover, Shah's documentary provided a good ideological fit with CNN's and President Bush's characterization of the Taliban as an "evil" enemy, who not only provided sanctuary for Osama bin Laden's network but also committed brutal atrocities of its own.

Conversely, however, Shah's representation of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), the underground organization whose members risk their lives in daily struggles to expose and sabotage the Taliban, challenges the traditional, male-exclusive concept of heroism. So does the courage and agency of the filmmaker herself, who secretly filmed the documen-

tary inside Afghanistan. In that sense, the broadcast broke radically with the conventions of hegemonic masculinity.

As I write this, six weeks after the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks and the Pennsylvania plane crash, the recovery mission in New York is complete, US bombs are falling on Afghanistan, and women have returned to the screen as government spokespersons, experts, and reporters. Condoleeza Rice has not only become more visible but audible as well, while Laura Bush has returned to the "normal" background role of First Lady. America is now in the throes of a new crisis: the anthrax attack that has not only targeted the US government, but also media themselves.

Notes

1. Lemann, Nicholas. 2001. "The Options: The President and the Crisis." *The New Yorker*, October 1: 70–81.
2. Sferrazza Anthony, Carl. 2001. Quoted by Fave Fiore, "Comforting America." *The Morning Call*, Allentown, PA, October 19: D1–D2.
3. For an excellent, feminist analysis of Western cultural constructions of heroism, see: Hartsock, Nancy. 1989. "Masculinity, Heroism, and the Making of War," in Adrienne Harris and Ynestra King (eds.) *Rocking the Ship of State: Towards a Feminist Peace Politics*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
4. I am, of course, drawing upon R.C. Connell's theoretical formulation here. See: Connell, R.C. 1987. *Gender and Power*. Oxford: Polity Press.

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News Terrorism: Misogyny Exposed and the Easy Journalism of Conflict¹

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It's wartime again. And the news media slip comfortably back into the familiar journalistic war framework. Newspaper pages are lined with loaded political rhetoric, jingoism, and battle language. One question for feminist media studies is to figure where women fit in this paradigm. There are two points I'd like to make in this short article with regards to women and news coverage since the US attacks. While I will refer to each point separately, they are both inherently linked. The first concerns the rapid return to the conventional journalism of conflict and the second concerns the exposure of the misogynistic tendencies of the news media.

The conventional journalism of conflict

Far from sliding into obscurity, women obviously do have their place in the news coverage of conflict. Conflict as a sub-genre of hard news content exists on a continuum. In the macro sense, America's declaration of war against