

COVERING THE NEW AGE OF TERROR

Anthrax, al-Qaida, and Ethics in a 24/7 News Environment

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Where were we on Sept. 10? Can anyone remember the national mood on 9/10?

There were fears of recession in the air, but recent news was focused elsewhere. We had just finished the summer of shark attacks, with Jaws-like headlines of swimmers losing their legs in shallow water along the East Coast.

Then there's California Congressman Gary Condit, who despite my persistent wishes would not leave the media. Mr. Condit insisted he had nothing to do with the disappearance of intern Chandra Levy, but he looked damn suspicious.

Also news was Jennifer Lopez's marriage; an even bigger story was Michael Jordan's return to the basketball court. And, of course, the year's top news story remained the razor-thin election of George W. Bush to the presidency. Ten months after the vote, there was still debate about dimpled chads and confusing ballots.

I can tell you what I'd been working on. Among my last stories was an expose of a UFO cult trying to clone humans in a secret lab. I was working a piece on the Colombian cocaine trade, which now seems very far away, indeed. Washington, D.C. shuts down during much of August, and many of us had left town – my wife and I had taken our ten-year-old daughter river rafting in Oregon. We were just getting back into the rhythm of things...

On the Tuesday morning of 9/11, I got a call at home from my editor. "Turn on the TV," she said. I could tell by her voice that something was amiss. "What's wrong?" I asked. "Just turn on the TV," she repeated. Soon I was transfixed, watching the images of the first World Trade Center tower ablaze. It was surreal.

For those of us who covered terrorism before 9/11, it seemed readily apparent that this was no accident. Jets do not simply crash into Manhattan skyscrapers. Equally important, the World Trade Center had been a past target before – in 1993, Islamic extremists had tried to topple the two towers as part of a broad campaign of terror. The world hadn't taken much notice, but Osama bin Laden had declared war on America since then. His followers had destroyed our embassies in East Africa in 1998; they had tried bombing Los Angeles International Airport as we celebrated the Millennium; and they nearly sank the USS Cole in Yemen ten months later. It was only a matter of time before they hit the U.S. mainland again.

All this was running through my head as I watched the images on CNN. Then I saw the second plane hit.

This was one of those moments when you know your life is about to change. As I hustled to my office, I watched an eerie scene unfold – lines of cars were heading in the other direction, away from the Pentagon, away from central Washington. There were reports that the Pentagon had been attacked, that smoke was rising from the National Mall and that the Washington Monument and White House might have been hit. Other reports suggested that three, maybe four planes were hijacked. I got to work in time to see the Trade Center towers collapse...

This was not the first time that terrorism hit close to home for me: in 1995, I was living in Japan when a bizarre, New Age cult decided to nerve gas the Tokyo subway. That was my commute – I changed trains at Kasumigaseki, the transfer station they targeted. Fortunately, I'm a writer and get up late. They hit at 8 a.m., at the peak of rush hour. Still, my wife and daughter passed through the station just two hours after the attack, not knowing why their train didn't stop. We lived through months of fear and uncertainty as Japanese authorities bungled their way toward stopping the cult.

Again, in 1998, I saw up close the impact of terrorism. My magazine sent me to East Africa after bin Laden's men bombed U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. I interviewed the victims, saw the damage first-hand, and walked in rubble that still held human bone fragments...

Now, in 2001, terror came calling again: the original pilot of the hijacked plane that hit the Pentagon was close to good friends of ours; other friends in New York barely escaped the collapse of the Trade Center.

For the next two months, I was the busiest ever in a very busy career. My colleagues and I faced the biggest story of the decade, perhaps of our careers.

I think our editorial process mirrored those of other news organizations around the nation, indeed around the world. How do we cover this incredible event? The normal news divisions wouldn't work. There was too much to do, too many events, too many angles: we had planes down in three locations, four hijackings, 19 hijackers, dramatic impacts on transportation, law enforcement, finance. Wall Street. was closed... Then there was foreign policy, defense, Congress -- the nation was getting ready for war. Suddenly, everyone became a terrorism reporter.

We broke down the traditional lines that separated work at the magazine and made ad hoc groups – focusing on the investigation, the victims, the FAA and transportation, the military response, the economic impact. The normal work of our 200 staffers ceased.

We put in 14-hour days, one after another. We threw together two special issues and began to run breaking stories on our Web site. Our weekly ran at a daily pace -- without the staff that large dailies have. Our first special issue hit the stands three days after attack. The public's appetite for news was enormous – our newsstand sales are usually about 45,000; this one sold 450,000.

The frantic pace continued for many days. Finally, after three weeks of this, we were able to catch our collective breath. Then the war began.

And then, just days later, the anthrax attacks hit.

It was quite a fall...

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I want to talk about some of the key challenges we faced in the 9/11 coverage, ethical and otherwise. It's hard to separate the two, for when we in the news media are doing our job well, we're being ethical – we're being fair, accurate, open and working hard to balance the public's right to know against competing interests.

Information Overload – Perhaps the most immediate problem was this. The number of emails heading my way tripled – they came from staff, from free-lancers, from friends and family, from outsiders. In that first week we hired 20 people worldwide to help with our coverage. There were emails and phone calls from them, various editors, other staffers. There were military and terrorism experts wanting to be quoted. Human rights activists wanting their views known. Cable TV shows wanting talking heads. And worst of all: Companies peddling anti-terror products, like anthrax clean-up chemicals...

Competitive pressures – Two central tenets help guide our work in the news media: first, to inform our readers in the most comprehensive, enlightened way; and second, to offer exclusive and innovative takes on the news. This latter goal became a real challenge for any news outlet, especially those that weren't daily.

The concept of a 24/7 news environment is by now well known. It's almost a cliché today. With the advent of all-day cable TV news shows and the Internet, we now have 24-hour per day news cycles. We've seen this particularly in the big stories of recent years, like the O.J. trial and the Clinton sex scandal.

I understood the concept, but must admit that I didn't quite get it. While I report on breaking stories from time to time, my work on an investigative team often gives me the luxury of going my own way. I didn't realize how good I had it. Before 9/11, I competed with handful of national security and law enforcement reporters in Washington. Since 9/11, it seems like I've been competing with half the news media. The daily newspapers were killing us. It seemed no scoop, no angle would wait a week. *U.S. News* finally made its peace with the Web, and we started throwing stories online. That, combined with our special issues and late closings, helped make us competitive.

Accuracy: The amount of misinformation in the media has been too high since 9/11. We saw it earlier in the Monica coverage. Competing news outlets end up throwing stories onto their broadcasts, into their dailies and weeklies, and onto their websites. In the 9/11 coverage, the problems came from overworked and, at times, inexperienced, reporters. But they also came from our sources. We're as good as our sources, and usually reliable officials often didn't know what was going on. We soon started to ask them, "Where'd you learn this?" Frequently the answer was CNN.

We had to contend with trying to confirm one questionable story after another: There were new hijackers seized; no, they weren't hijackers. Bin Laden's been sighted; no, he's not been seen. The anthrax came from overseas; no, it's domestic. We at *U.S. News* perhaps fared better than some, being a weekly, but we, too, had close calls. One friend at the FBI's public affairs office told me he spent half his time shooting stories down. Some became urban legends. There was the tale of a World Trade Center survivor surfing the wreckage down to safety. Didn't happen. Another story making the rounds was the arrest of Arabs caught on the Washington, D.C. subway, timing the trains; that, too, didn't happen. And, of course, there were all the anthrax false alarms, some triggered by Nutrasweet and dust particles.

It made me think about cable TV's Comedy Channel, which has its own newscast. Instead of a slogan out front like *America Strikes Back*, it had *America Freaks Out*. That seemed about right.

The nature of this kind of information makes it especially tough. There's no one-stop shopping for news on terrorism. I did a recent story about the intelligence windfall the U.S. has received from the caves and safe houses in Afghanistan. The story ran only about seven paragraphs, but to report it I talked to the State Department, the FBI, the CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Treasury Department, the Customs Service, the Pentagon's Central Command, and staff members in Congress. For one story.

The pressure for exclusives is great. The BBC, that respected name in international news, released a story in late October, alleging that Oryx Natural Resources, a diamond mining firm in the Congo, was closely tied to Al Qaeda and that one of its top shareholders was a right-hand man of bin Laden's. The company's credit dried up, phone calls went unanswered, and the firm faced financial disaster. A month later, the BBC made a 60-second, on-air apology, admitting the story was wrong. It had confused an Oryx shareholder – Kamal Kal Fhan – with Mohammed Khalfan, a bin Laden supporter jailed for his role in the 1998 embassy bombings.

The move to infotainment has made things worse. People like Geraldo Rivera have blurred the lines between entertainment and journalism. In Rivera's case, the veracity of his reports from Afghanistan has been called into question. In my business, all we've really got is our credibility – with our readers, our sources – and we must guard that every day.

Yet, with that said, the vast majority of the reporting done by mainstream media has been careful, honest and accurate. At *U.S. News*, our stories go through three levels of editors, fact-checking, and legal review. Other colleagues typically read the copy, as well. But in journalism, it's too often the mistakes that get the attention, like the one bad cop who makes an entire department look like a den of corruption.

How Much To Make Public

The media has gotten some deserved criticism for revealing too much. Just one month after the attacks, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a story about nonmetallic knives that can pass through airport security. The article included details not only on the problem, but on where to buy the knives, including the brand name, the price and even the UPS shipping fee. I just don't think that's necessary.

Since 9/11, readers have called up some papers and used the word “treason” after reporters highlighted vulnerabilities in our society. There’s a real debate here. This kind of reporting speaks to one of the media’s highest purposes: calling attention to important problems so that they can be corrected.

Several weeks before 9/11, we ran a story on the vulnerability of nuclear power plants to terrorism. The story showed that undercover government teams had easily penetrated those facilities. The consequences were huge. Regulators were lax and security was poor. Should we have run the story? Absolutely. But we ran with it an illustration of what the plants looked like and where they were potentially vulnerable. Would we have run that graphic after 9/11? Perhaps not.

But such ideas were everywhere in the media: Crash a plane into a nuclear power station. Infect terrorists with smallpox and loose them on an unsuspecting public. Attack dams, tunnels, bridges, stadiums, ports or pipelines. Poison the food supply or water supply. Crash a truck of toxic chemicals into a building.

Frankly, I’m not sure what the answer is. You do want to call attention to vulnerabilities so that they’re better protected. In some cases, the government was already moving to do that. In many cases they were not.

There’s a balance between calling attention to threat and hyping it. In writing our book on the Aum cult – the sect which nerve gassed the Tokyo subway -- my coauthor and I debated about whether to include certain material. We had the formula for sarin – the nerve agent that Aum used -- but it didn’t seem to add much to the story, so we left it out. We had the schematics for Aum’s design of attaches cases meant to disperse mists of botulinum toxin; these, too, were left out.

Our book was published in 1996 and helped sound the alarm about terrorists and weapons of mass destruction. But by popularizing Aum’s attempts to use chemical and biological weapons, we also may have sparked criminal interest in the subject. Certainly there were other books, as well as movies and countless news stories which dwelled on the topic. How much did they influence the hundreds of anthrax scares that later occurred, or on al Qaeda’s interest in the subject?

Covering an Active Investigation

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, I was in a strange quandary: To do my job well, I had to bother the very people I should be leaving alone – the officials trying to coordinate and make sense out of the worst terrorist attack in US history. This brings us to a longstanding dilemma in crime reporting – should journalists get in the way of an active investigation? It’s something that’s given reporters a bad name among cops for as long as both groups have been at it. Sometimes a journalist is pursuing a story that leads him into an active case; at that point, we may make a deal not to blow what could be a year-long police investigation, reveal an informant, or screw up a coming bust.

The same is true in national security. Journalists have held off stories after officials quietly made the case that exposure of certain program or event could damage the nation's security. I think the media's record is pretty good on that. But not always. Some officials note that after reporters revealed there were U.S. intercepts of bin Laden's satellite phone, the terrorist leader stopped using it.

Where, then, to draw the line? After 9/11, we were looking at the largest criminal investigation in U.S. history: there were 7,000 FBI agents and support staff, hundreds of other cops, federal agents, and intelligence officers. The public really wanted to know what kind of progress was being made, whether airports were truly cracking down on security, whether critical facilities were being protected. Meanwhile, we began sending our soldiers overseas to fight in a foreign war. There were – and continue to be -- legitimate questions raised about civilian casualties and the treatment of prisoners. At home, people deserve to know who's being picked up on questionable charges, and held without bail in Immigration jails. Again, there's a balance here.

For most of us, balancing patriotism with journalistic professionalism is not a problem. So indiscriminate are the killings, so murderous is the intent that I think there's a feeling we're all under attack. Bin Laden has issued a fatwa – a religious edict – calling for the killing of all Americans: men, women, and children. Many of the folks I work with had friends and family who perished or nearly did in both New York and Washington.

Some journalists have described it in the starkest of terms. As TV newsman Brit Hume put it: "This is a conflict between the United States and murdering barbarians."

Anthrax, meanwhile, turned the news media into part of the story: bioterror was suddenly not an abstract concept. We had colleagues being tested for anthrax, newsrooms quarantined, mailrooms and mail delivery shut down for weeks. We stopped accepting paper mail from our readers, a real loss. Media staffers were tested for contamination at the *St. Petersburg Times*, the *New York Times*, CBS News, the *Boston Globe*, the *Columbus Dispatch* and *Newsweek*.

But though we've felt under attack, that doesn't mean we stop doing our jobs, nor does it sweep aside the public's right to know.

Many of the controversies we face hinge on secrecy. In the wake of 9/11, a wave of secrecy has swept over federal agencies: web site information has disappeared, public affairs officers have stonewalled, the White House has limited Congress' access to information. Our government seems to be telling the news media, "Just trust us." The problem here is that this is a two-way street. To gain that trust, our government needs to be as open as possible.

During the Gulf War, the military greatly limited news media access to its operations and even detained journalists who evaded roadblocks set up to limit their reporting. Officials were determined not to let the media influence course of war. But such things backfire. You win support by being open about mistakes as well as successes.

On October 9, seventeen news organizations knew that the U.S. attack on Afghanistan was imminent, when the Pentagon summoned their reporters for aircraft carrier duty. There was an implicit understanding that the journalists would keep it quiet -- and everyone did. Yet earlier this month, *Washington Post* reporter Doug Struck arrived near the scene of an apparent case of mistaken fire involving a CIA missile. He was held at gunpoint and told he'd be shot if he went to the scene. It's not the first time in Afghanistan we've been threatened with death by our own troops, or had our film confiscated. Sometimes U.S. officers are content to let Afghan troops do the intimidating.

At least nine journalists have died in Afghanistan; another has now been brutally murdered in Pakistan. With warlord armies, bandits, and bin Laden out there, we don't need our own government threatening to kill us, too.

Ultimately, whatever cover-ups and embarrassments are out there will emerge. That's the beauty of the American system. It's very tough to keep secrets in today's Washington. In addition to our own aggressive media, you've got the foreign press in Europe, Pakistan and elsewhere digging for stories; information coming from allied governments that include Europe and Israel; independent Internet sites; and a mish-mash of federal, state and local agencies that deal with law enforcement, health, and emergency services. You may as well level with us now. As Presidents Nixon and Clinton learned, cover ups do more harm than good.

Terminology. Finally, let me say a few words about some of the words and phrasings that have attracted attention. Following the 9/11 attacks, President Bush used the word "crusade" to describe the allied response. He quickly retreated, and for good reason. To Moslems, the term connotes the religious wars waged against them by Christians. Not a good choice, and certainly not something my magazine is interested in using.

Another controversial term is "Islamic terrorist." The Society of Professional Journalists and a religion writers association have called for avoiding use of phrases like "Islamic terrorist" or "Muslim extremist." They argue that the terms are misleading because they link whole religions to criminal activity. SPJ suggests we use phrases like "Al Qaeda terrorists" or "political Islamists."

That seems off the mark. At my magazine, we have used "Jihadists," but we also use Islamic terrorists, just as I'd use Jewish extremists or Japanese terrorists. I've covered organized crime for many years, and the ethnic or national label is important: Chinese gangsters, Colombian drug dealers, Jewish mobsters, Italian Mafiosi. In the case of al Qaeda, it's inextricably tied to what these people are -- there is a war going on between radical Islam and the West, and between radical Islam and moderate Islam.

Reuters apparently has a problem even with the word "terrorist." After 9/11, the wire service issued a internal memo stressing the need to remain impartial, noting that "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter." Their stories referred to "attacks," not terrorism. Give me a break. How does flying 767s into skyscrapers qualify as fighting for freedom? How is it not terrorism? Some moral judgment and common sense are okay here.

So How Are We Doing?

With all our faults and challenges, the news media are doing better. At least that's what the public thinks. We reached some new lows during the Monica Lewinsky scandal, according to polls by the Pew Research Center. Before 9/11, the Center found public opinion of the media at its lowest level in their 15 years of polling. Past surveys showed that journalists ranked at low end of the scale, alongside politicians, lawyers and insurance salesmen.

But in a December poll, they found opinion was up across the board. Perhaps that's because the media has been covering stories -- the war on terrorism and protecting the home front -- that are seen as relevant to peoples' lives.

Almost two-thirds say those in the news business help protect democracy -- the highest levels seen in the Center's 15 years of polling. Three-fourths rated coverage of the war on terrorism as good or excellent, down from nine in ten who felt that way right after the attacks.

The number who think the news media care about people they report on has doubled from 23 per cent just before the attacks to 47 per cent now.

For someone who got into this business out of idealism and wanting to make the world better, that's heartening news. As we move forward into the post-9/11 world, at least we're doing something right.

Thank you very much.

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