

# How might television negatively affect democracy, politics, and government policy in the aftermath of 9/11 in the United States of America?

*Written by Jennifer Dumoulin, Department of Communication, University of Ottawa*

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On September 11, 2001, two hijacked planes crashed into the North and South towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. A third plane crashed into the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and a fourth crash-landed in a field in Pennsylvania. The World Trade Center towers, affectionately known as the Twin Towers, collapsed mere hours after impact. Two years after this tragic event occurred, CNN's Phil Hirschorn (2003) noted that the revised death toll of September 11 totaled 2,752 individuals, not including the 10 hijackers who crashed the airplanes.

The purpose of this essay is to determine how television might negatively affect democracy, politics, and government policy in the United States of America following the terror attacks of 9/11. In order to do so, this study begins by briefly examining the development of television technology and the origins of political broadcasting in the United States. This is followed by a discussion of theories on the negative effects of television news media on interpersonal trust, political trust, and policy support. After examining the effects of varying media forms, this essay shifts its focus to a post-9/11 evaluation of news media in the United States in order to examine the degree of influence that the media may have had on government policies, political attitudes, and public opinion. The essay concludes by discussing potential future impacts of information communication technologies on democracy, politics, and government.

As with many contemporary corporations, during the 1920s "the [Radio Corporation of America] (RCA) spent millions on television research and attempted to buy out or crush other competitors in [what Conway (2007) has described as] its attempts to dominate the visual medium" (p.36). Due to its substantial investment in technological research RCA achieved many of televisions first. As an example, its network, the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), broadcast live sporting events which included baseball and boxing (Conway, 2007, p.36). Despite having a technological advantage, RCA and its networks decided against developing a daily news segment. It was the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) that developed "a separate television news presence" (Conway, 2007, p.37) beginning in 1941.

Many theories have been developed surrounding the effects of television on its viewing audience. Robert Putnam argues that television is in large part responsible for the "decline of social capital in the United States" (Lee, Capella, and Southwell, 2003, p.415). Social capital, for the purpose of this essay, is comprised of participation in group activities, political involvement, and interpersonal trust. As noted by Gross, Aday, and Brewer (2004), "interpersonal trust, or trust in other people, [has been found to shape] cooperation, volunteering, giving to charity, and policy preferences" (p.50). Gross et al. (2004) also suggested that "political trust affects

compliance with government authority, voting behaviour, and policy preferences” (p.50). Based on these definitions, it can be assumed that social and political trust can influence government policy, politics and democracy. Positive levels of social and political should therefore increase trust in other people, including government officials and media officers, and reduce opposition to government legislation.

In his argument against television, Putnam put forth three reasons supporting his theory. This line of reasoning, as noted by Lee et al. (2003) is as follows:

- 1) Television arrived on the social scene in the early 1950s and reached 90% saturation by 1959. [...] The generations showing the largest drop in civic capital are those from 1955 forward.
- 2) Television may induce passivity [...] in the audience, presumably draining the energy and will to participate in civic life. Television competes for time, reducing the audience’s opportunity to participate in civic life, and
- 3) Television violence may lead to excessive fear in its heaviest users, thus undermining [interpersonal] trust. (p.415)

While conducting their studies Lee et al. (2003), in contrast with Putnam, found evidence suggesting that it is not the actual television exposure that affects social capital, but rather the content of television (p.432). To support such a hypothesis, they draw on the work of Strange and Leung who argued that in contemporary society, television audiences engage in predominantly fictional media rather than non-fictional media (Lee et al., 2003, p.432). This may result in the audience being substantially influenced by both media forms in terms of their attitudes towards social life (Lee et al., 2003, p.432).

A second theory that was distinguished by Lee et al. (2003) was that of Mares, who proposed that the process of source confusion, in which the audience mistakes fiction for news, greatly influences judgments of social reality (p. 432). Mares found evidence to support his claim by studying the degree of false recollection of information from movie trailers and news segments. He demonstrated that “the impact of viewing on possessing TV-biased beliefs was greater among those with high levels of fiction-to-news confusion” (Lee et al., 2003, p.432). Satirical television programs such as *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart and *The Colbert Report* are contemporary examples of how “news coverage and entertainment programming [may] converge in format and visual style [perhaps] increasing [the] potential for source confusion” (Lee et al., 2003, p.432).

As noted by de Vreese (2004), “news is the key source of information about politics and the economy for a majority of citizens in Western democracies” (p.192). Information obtained from the mass media is rarely questioned. In fact, it may be argued that because information is acquired by mass media it is evidence of its validity (Sadik, 2007).

de Vreese (2004) identified two forms of politically-related news: strategic news and game news. Strategic news is defined as “news coverage of candidate motivations and personalities, focus on disagreement between [political] parties, candidates or voters, and the presence and emphasis on polls in the news” (de Vreese, 2004, p.192). de Vreese (2004) defines game news as “the game providing the plot of a news story about politics while focusing on polls and positioning the electorate as spectators and candidates as performers” (p.192). By

distinguishing between different forms of news, de Vreese is suggesting that it is news content, or rather news framing, that influences attitudes and perceptions rather than merely television exposure.

Television is the only form of mass media which brings together visual images and sounds, and broadcast them directly to audiences in the comfort of their homes. Through television, film is also permitted to enter the home environment to a limited degree in that the film must be purchased, rented, or copied illegally. Television engages simultaneously the auditory and the visual senses of its audiences. As television engages multiple senses, this study suggests the following possibilities:

- 1) Information processing occurs at both a conscious and subconscious level in the audience, perhaps where one sense dominates the other.
- 2) It is possible for one level to be completely engaged in television content, and the other on a seemingly unrelated activity (for example, folding laundry while “listening” to an episode of *CSI: Miami*), and
- 3) If both levels are actively engaged in the viewing of television, then the information received is internally processed twice, or processed with priority and extra detail as it is deemed to be more complete than information received through only one sense.

As stated by Kellner (2004), “the September 11 terror attacks were claimed to be the most documented event in history” (p.44). Kellner (2004) also notes that “the live television broadcasting [of 9/11] brought a ‘you are there’ drama to the spectacle”, that much footage was broadcast repeatedly, and that the event “took over TV programming for [...] three days [following the attacks] without commercial break as the major television networks focused on the attack and its aftermath” (p.44).

A debate which surfaces frequently during any discussion on the effects on news media is that of “which came first, the event or the coverage?” In other words, one must ask does news media proportionally reflect the events that are unfolding or do the events that are occurring reflect the news media. This issue is a dominant issue when discussing the effects of violence on television, whether on the news or featured in entertainment programs. Loren Coleman, a behavioural expert, was interviewed by CTV.ca for an article which ran on October 3, 2006, after the Dawson College Shooting on September 13, 2006, where Kimveer Gill began shooting in the halls of the school. Coleman predicted that school shootings come in clusters, the size and timing of which are dependent upon media coverage (Brown, 2006). According to Coleman, “[because] the Dawson College shooting received a tremendous amount of attention [...] he immediately [considered] the possibility of more [shootings]” (Brown, 2006). Two weeks after the Dawson College incident, “53-year-old drifter Duane Morrison entered a Bailey, Colorado high school. He took six female students hostage, and sexually assaulted them before killing 16-year-old Emily Keyes and killing himself” (Brown, 2006).

While there is no doubt that the extensive media coverage of the September 11 terror attacks did not result in additional attacks on American soil, attacks were perpetrated in Madrid in 2004 and in London in 2005. If intensive media coverage of the 9/11 terror attacks gave rise to the subsequent terror attacks in Madrid and London, is it not possible that extensive coverage of

pro-government, pro-war messages by the American media gave rise to a similar, popular attitude amongst the American population?

As noted by Kellner (2004) in his study of post-9/11 broadcasting, the American media “[provided] a view of the [‘War on Terror’] totally different to that shown in other parts of the world” (p.56). This has also been observed by Gross et al. (2004) who found that “immediately after September 11, the news appears to have been dominated by pro-government messages” (p.65). Gross et al. found that:

“Many journalists appeared to engage in ‘patriotic journalism.’ [...] Flag logos appeared on the news, banners with ‘Attack on America’ flashed across the screen; anchors and reporters appeared on air wearing flag pins and ribbons and displaying emotions of horror and outrage at the attacks. [...] Partisan dissent and critical perspectives [that dominate politics dampened] within news coverage.” (p.65)

The news media, which is dominated by only a few corporations in the United States, became the American government’s and the Bush Administration’s biggest supporter. Opposition and criticism towards the American government or the Bush Administration and its policies did not appear in the mainstream media following the terror attacks of 9/11. The exception was a talk show host, whom within a short span after the attacks, discussed the possibility of the terrorists being heroes in their own country, and in the eyes of their god, as they sacrificed themselves for “the cause”. The host received immediate backlash because of his comments and was fired.

As observed by Gross et al.(2004), “surveys conducted in the month following September 11, 2001, recorded dramatic surges in trust in government, confidence in government institutions, and social trust” (p.57). During their study, they found that “television use, and not newspaper use, was associated with higher levels of trust in government and confidence in institutions during the surge [...]” (Gross et al., 2004, p.65) and argued that this relationship occurred because of the nature of the media coverage that followed in the aftermath of September 11.

Based on the information presented in Gross et al., we must ask ourselves whether or not the mass media was responsible for shaping attitudes in the United States of America immediately following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and, if so, did it result in negative outcomes. The major television networks bombarded airwaves with patriotic images immediately after the attacks, thus uniting the country, and other countries with it, in grief, in courage, and in hope. It would be premature to state that this was a positive impact of television. The images of courage and hope soon faded to images of government, revenge, and the prospect of war. As few to no dissenting voices emerged from television news, and news media in general, it was made to appear as though *The War on Terror* was the only solution – the only method of protecting the United States of America from other attacks.

The united message that was conveyed by television media raises two concerns:

- 1) “That individuals rarely consider the source of their information when making judgments. People simply use what is accessible” (Lee et al., 2003, p.432).

- 2) “Whether [news] coverage dominated by pro-government messages and symbols gives citizens the information necessary to engage in critical deliberation about important decisions” (Gross et al., 2004, p.68).

Alternately, according to the former Director of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Tom Ridge, there is no need to panic because “television has become part of the everyday, personalized and private [...] networks for administering safety and security” (Hay, 2007, p.218). As stated by Hay (2007), Ridge was alluding to television series such as *Survivor*, *Survivorman*, and other reality programs as a form of “citizenship training”. (Hay, 2007, p.219) Is the true purpose of television to train American citizens to protect themselves through the use of reality television? Or, does the issue of the influence of television run much deeper?

Television news has been found to influence political and social trust, which in turn affect political policies and trust in government officials. It is possible, through media manipulation and omission, to alter the attitudes and perceptions of audiences in order to avoid opposition to and encourage compliance with government authority and policies. It has also been suggested that the extensive and repeated portrayal of spectacle events, such as terror attacks and school shootings, in television news may perpetuate the events in question, thus posing risks to national and individual security as well as negatively impacting social trust.

If the television news, as an influential medium, portrays only limited, single-sided information, then how are audiences, and therefore democratic citizens, going to obtain the information necessary to critically debate important issues? As Kellner (2004) suggests, this may be achieved via the Internet (p.59). Access to the Internet grants the democratic citizen the freedom to seek his or her own information, using their desired resources. While some information on the Internet is questionable in terms of reliability, all information is a starting point to developing one’s skills in information-seeking, critical evaluation, and attitude developmental. The Internet has the potential to take political involvement and activism to previously unattainable levels in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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