

Brian A. Monahan, *The Shock of the News: Media Coverage and the Making of 9/11*

New York & London: New York University Press, 2010, 221 p.

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**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/inmedia/479>

DOI: 10.4000/inmedia.479

ISSN: 2259-4728

Publisher

Center for Research on the English-Speaking World (CREW)

Electronic reference

Delphine Letort, « Brian A. Monahan, *The Shock of the News: Media Coverage and the Making of 9/11* », *InMedia* [Online], 2 | 2012, Online since 19 December 2012, connection on 24 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/inmedia/479> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/inmedia.479>

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- 1 Brian A. Monahan's book examines the changing work practices in the mainstream media, underscoring the economic, technological, and cultural shifts that have affected the news industry, which has turned into a for-profit business over the last twenty years. While the first chapter of the book provides a theoretical overview of what the author defines as "public drama," in reference to the news packages devised by the media to attract a larger audience, the second chapter focuses on a constructionist analysis of the treatment of 9/11 in the media (television, press and the Internet), and the third chapter assesses the consequences of this media strategy, through the memory it constructed of the events. The focus on Ground Zero in on-location news reports prompted journalists to pinpoint the involvement of fire fighters in the emergency response. Dubbed the "knights in shining fire helmets" by the *New York Times*, the fire fighters were turned into heroes and their collective valorisation continued for weeks and months after September 11 (140).
- 2 "We are in the age of the endless news cycle," asserts the author considering that 24-hour television news networks such as MSNBC and the Internet have contributed to the transformation of news into entertainment (3). News workers have been driven away from long-standing values that defined the core of their profession, including "objectivity, public interest, the pursuit of truth" (3), and encouraged to shape

compelling stories into “newsworthy” information that “make it sell,” prioritizing highly dramatic and emotional news items that include “stirring accounts, heartfelt moments, captivating images, harrowing encounters, and compelling characters” (xii-xiii). News workers play up the dramatic stories of news items through words, statistics and images that sensationalize the events; they create plots and shape characters to transform individual news items into dramatic news story lines. The author highlights the impact of the devised strategy: “newsworthiness” and “public drama” develop and sustain the visibility of individuals whose newly gained fame and celebrity combine with “moral currency.” Provided they continue to draw media attention, these people may use the legitimacy accrued in the process to speak or act on specific issues.

- 3 The author chronicles how 9/11 was treated by the media on a day-to-day basis from the moment news broke out that a plane had hit the Twin Towers to September 17. Not only does he compare various shows and television channels, but he is also able to pinpoint the progressive shift in focus by retracing how the events were framed from morning to afternoon and evening programs. Monahan emphasizes that 9/11 was interpreted through the “moral shock” it produced (58-64); the media advanced the notion of American victimization and the need for a military hunt for justice. By quoting from the programs he mentions, illustrating the simplifying narratives that were shaped at the time, he demonstrates the media gave the Bush Administration a moral ground to respond militarily. The news reporters spotlighted the situation on Ground Zero, including the rescue efforts and the tales of narrow escape or tragic deaths, downplaying the crash of Airline Flight 93 in western Pennsylvania.
- 4 Looking back to the media footage of the period, Monahan singles out the role of the fire fighters, who embodied the characters and provided the gripping stories necessary for the construction of public drama. The Official Fire Department City of New York (FDNY) gained power and visibility because fire fighters were hailed as the heroes of 9/11 across the media spectrum. The FDNY’s newfound public status made them able to use their “moral currency” (37-38; 154-170) to resist Mayor Rudy Giuliani’s decisions to reduce the number of rescue workers on site in November 2001 (160). On the other hand, President Georges W. Bush and other political elites exploited the symbiotic relationship between the FDNY and Ground Zero to articulate domestic and international policies. While Democrat Jim McGreevey and Republican Bret Schundler both courted the fire fighters’ endorsement during the campaign for New Jersey governor (165), New York governor George Pataki repeatedly praised fire fighters in an attempt to capitalize on their popularity (166). For Monahan, the media have taken part in constructing the “ideology of September 11,” which has become “a morality tale about patriotism, loss, victimhood and heroes” (172). He underscores the rhetorical use of 9/11 in George W. Bush’s and Vice President Dick Cheney’s speeches, suggesting the media helped create support for the Bush administration’s surveillance policies.
- 5 The author alludes to other events that have undergone identical media treatment – Hurricane Katrina, the O.J. Simpson trial, the disappearance of Chandra Levy, among others, thus demonstrating that his frame of analysis can be transferred to other cases. He underscores that the mainstream news media influence our perception of social reality by ascribing meaning to the events they present through specific framing. However, laying stress on what is deemed as newsworthy and valuable information to attract more viewers may often prove distorting. The chaos following Katrina was all

too often framed as an issue of law and order, downplaying the humanitarian crisis that wreaked havoc in New Orleans and the race and class dimension of the drama.

- 6 Monahan's book provides the viewer with the theoretical tools necessary to comprehend the media logics and politics. Based on a close analysis of media framing in the wake of 9/11, the author manages to express a critical view about a time of confusion. The book also implicitly hints at all the unsaid, suggesting the mainstream media can no longer be deemed as a reliable source of information considering its infotainment slant. The author pinpoints the limits of public drama when he points out that packaging news as a dramatic and emotionally gripping story all too often produces misrepresentations – “a significantly slanted picture of reality” (182).
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