

Cristopher Cepernich

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 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/34636)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 1, gennaio-aprile 2011

Ente di afferenza:

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Book reviews

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The news industry has undergone wide transformations in recent decades. The growing importance of 24 hour TV news channels and the explosion of the Internet on the world scale are just two of the many factors that have driven deep changes in journalistic practices – in terms of which events and issues are defined as “newsworthy” and the manner in which selected information and images are organized and packaged for presentation to audiences – but also in the ways that people consume news. The popular uprisings currently sweeping the southern side of the Mediterranean area are a case at point. They provide a paradigmatic example of how satellite news networks – such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya – played a fundamental role first in sowing and then fuelling the democratic demands of public opinion across the Arab world, and of how, once the uprising was underway, the Web became an organizational tool and channel for mobilizing insurgents.

Brian A. Monahan’s book *The Shock of the News. Media Coverage and the Making of 9/11* is part of an increasingly growing corpus of researches into “new journalism” and its implications, taking a firmly sociological approach (rather than the more sterile perspective of media studies), with the focus placed on analyzing the impact that these new ways of constructing reality can have on everyday life. Such scholarship finds its precursors in the work of Elizabeth Bird and John Tomlinson, who would seem to have inspired Monahan’s own work, but which mysteriously he never cites once.

Vaunting an excellent series of outstanding reviews on its back cover (including by David Altheide), the book opens with a look at the mainstream news media’s overriding trend to present and package news much like the episodes of a soap opera, with one twist in the tale after the next, or like a TV series with a surprise ending. Media resources and audience attention are becoming more and more oriented toward news that is fashioned into long-running “serialized dramas.” The trend is by no means typical of American journalism alone, however, considering the exasperating coverage given by both the Italian print and TV media to the most heinous of crime news stories – from the Cogne case to the more recent family murder in Avetrana, as well as to scandals, wars and natural catastrophes that can be serialized by the media into stories. Thus the traditional boundaries between information and entertainment have been blurred, giving rise to the new media genres of infotainment, the reality-show and docufiction, all of assured success with audiences.

In the first three chapters that make up Part I of the book, Monahan discusses the factors behind the growth of public drama as a form of packaging and presenting news. He explains that news as public drama is the product of cost-cutting and economic limitations in the news industry, as “Media officials can appreciate public drama because it is a cost-effective form of news, is relatively easy to produce, can captivate and hold a large audience, and can be sustained within the news cycle longer than most news items”

[p. 28]. Once developed, a public drama provides material for the news cycle for a long period of time.

The main focus of the book however is not so much the theoretical framework laid in Part I, but rather the empirical case study developed in the parts II and III. Here Monahan seeks to identify the peculiar cognitive effects produced on audiences by this new way of constructing reality and, consequently, consuming it. As Walter Lippmann taught, the information we acquire through our interaction with media shapes our perceptions of social reality. We use mediated knowledge as a basis for activity, for how we define a situation, and for we understand current events. This is particularly true for news content which we use to construct our view of the world around us and make sense of social life. Monahan's chosen case study is the dramatization of the most widely and intensely covered event of the media age: the 9/11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. In his analysis, Monahan focuses, for TV, on the NBC network's coverage for one week after the attacks, consisting of 15 full hours of coverage on 9/11 and a selection of coverage from each of the following days, and, for print news, the New York Times' 9/11-related content for one full year after the attacks.

The main argument advanced by the author is that "by packaging and presenting these events in accordance with the media logic of public drama, America's mainstream media tilted the balance in favor of certain interpretations and, by extension, determined the social and political response to the attacks" [p. 10]. The media's effort to present 9/11 news in the most dramatic and emotional terms limited the stock of frames that journalists and audiences could use to make sense of the event. "This, in turn, allowed the dramatic, emotional, theatrical, and simplistic representation of this complex and consequential historical moment to influence how political leaders, media officials, and others have constructed and used the dominant notions of 9/11 in the years since" [p. 10]. The analysis provided of the frames identified within the dominant narrative shows how those frames were used to construct the overarching 9/11 narrative, in which the media's live coverage of events as they unfolded was accompanied by a prominent frame of moral shock. Moral shocks are unusual, unexpected and ambiguous, and as such they suddenly invalidate many of the social meanings we hold, leading people to seek new ways to make sense of their uncertain surroundings, often in a collective rush to the mass media. Of course the public drama of a moral shock can be a potent creator of social meanings.

The second frame, prominent in the media coverage just after attacks, was one of responsibility and retaliation. People all around the world needed to know "Who did this? How did this happen? How should the United States respond to the attacks?". At that stage media coverage conveyed a dominant frame that advanced the notions of American victimization and urgent need for a military response against its enemies. The third was the dealing and healing frame, where the "dealing" component refers to stories about the physical response at the three crash sites or policies in response to the attacks (the grounding of flights after the attacks or changes in airport security), while the "healing" component involves stories about the emotional or cognitive processing of events (coping with the loss of a loved person or talking to kids about the attacks).

The story told by the media was a live melodramatic tale charged with emotion, which overwhelmingly challenged the values system of an entire population and wiped

out the certainty and myth of geographic inviolability. A melodrama played out by the stereotypical characters of a Hollywood movie – the victims of a tragic disaster, the villains embodying Evil, and the heroes embodying Good that triumphs over Evil (NYC firefighters above all, though also Commander-in-Chief George W. Bush). This public drama, which also followed a spectacularisation logic not taken into consideration by the analysis, built a symbolic framework through which a shared sense of meaning could be given to what was an unexpected tragedy. It was on this public drama that the 9/11 ideology was constructed, explains Monahan. An ideology that has proved robust and enduring, seen at work even in the 2008 US presidential elections, and is as present as ever today in political analysis and discourses across the globe to explain the war in Iraq and in Afghanistan, the world economic crisis, and now the insurgency across North Africa. Rest assured, Professor Fukuyama: History did not come to end with the Cold War and its old ideologies.

Cristopher Cepernich
University of Torino