

From the Media Awareness Network



Barry's Bulletin

a popular culture digest for media educators

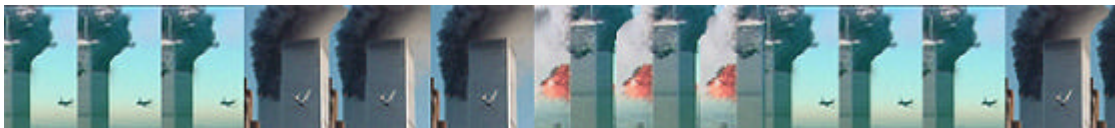
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In this month's bulletin:

**Discourse/Clusters of Ideas II The News II Media Threads II The Entertainment Business
Other Perspectives II Language and Thought II Historical Perspectives
The Final Word**

The Day the World Changed: Studying the Events of September 11 for Media and Global Education



If there was ever any doubt about the need for global studies, with or without media education, the horrific events of Sept 11 clinched it. The assault on America changed our world, and presumably the epistemological basis of our education. We felt fear, which became anger, which in many people turned to hate. When the planes crashed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, we were given indelible images to contemplate. Seeing the second plane that crashed into the south tower and the subsequent fireball was surreal, repeating this iconic image was a nightmarish experience.

As Marshall McLuhan noted: "Ours is a brand new world of all-at-onceness. Time has ceased, space has vanished. We now live in a global village, a simultaneous happening. We have had to shift our stress of attention from action to reaction. We must now know in advance the consequences of any policy or action, since the results are experienced without delay." Indeed, within minutes anyone close to a TV set was watching the unfolding events. We tried desperately to put a face to this unknown enemy, tried to provide context to a story that had no apparent beginning or end. For over a week, this catastrophe allowed us to react to many acts of courage and grace under extreme pressure, as firemen, the police, and other rescue workers risked their lives to look for victims in the toxic rubble in which nearly 3,000 people ultimately lost their lives.

The central concept of media study is representation, and the downside of the tragic events focused on the spiral of hate instantly generated. Some frustrated people engaged in "othering," shouting their slurs at anyone with a Middle-Eastern appearance. Film buffs would note ironically that Hollywood films such as *The Siege*, *Independence Day* and *Air Force One* have filled our imaginations with fictitious terrorist narratives that provide us with good guys (American cowboy-style) and bad guys (often Middle-Eastern). Some of these stories (and a few slated to be launched shortly by Hollywood) featured attacks on big city towers. Fantasy has become real. And that's what's scary.



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What is important for teachers is knowing how to conduct classes in which critical, dialogical thinking is skilfully directed; and a powerful topic explored for which no immediate study guides may be available. Teachers need to learn how to deal with both the emotive and intellectual content of important events like those of September 11. Of course, it goes without saying that some students – especially at the elementary school level – may have experienced some kind of trauma. Teachers must move slowly, dealing first with emotional responses. An article in the New York Times on September 19, by Richard Rothstein, asserted that very few teachers were doing an adequate job of bringing the necessary critical thinking skills to this multi-layered topic.

In scrutinizing the mass media, we have been presented with a major teach-in on topics ranging from the mourning of the victims killed by terrorist attacks, to geography lessons on Afghanistan and the Middle East. Innumerable television specials, magazine supplements – *Time*, *Macleans* – make us relive the events – and, in some cases, help us understand them better. At the same time, we are seeing the predictable recycling and narrowing of political and social views that occur in wartime. The events of September 11 have generated an outpouring of propaganda, frequently yielding an excess of binary oppositions – us vs. them, good vs. evil.

As citizens who want in-depth coverage and interpretations, we need to nourish vigorous, responsible media that are probing and critical. Many students are abysmally ignorant of international affairs, and lack the skills to see how calamitous events are mediated. Whether we like it or not, terrorism knows no borders. More than ever, we are all global citizens. However, the question remains: are educators ready?

What kind of discussions are we dealing with? UK media educator Len Masterman reminds us that "dialogue seeks to understand phenomena, including the group's own activities, not as static and knowable, but always in their processes of change and development. Whereas discussion frequently does little more than recycle pre-existing ideas and knowledge, dialogue aims to generate more complex forms of understanding." (*Teaching the Media*, p.33.)

We must not ignore or water down the ideological meanings and implications of our analysis. Terrorism is all about power, intimidation, and oppression. The fact that many developing countries see Americans as oppressors should prompt a reappraisal of past actions.

Any comprehensive curriculum requires us to go beyond mainstream sources of information. By examining alternative publications such as *The Nation*, *The New Internationalist*, *Extra*, and Web sites such as indymedia.com and alternet.org, we are introduced to a rich array of perspectives. Critical thinking requires sources with conflicting views and ideologies based on more than jealousy – it does not imply sympathy for these views. But we cannot mobilise properly against foes we do not understand. Teachers should include material with multiple points of view. In addition, we need to investigate publications from countries such as Pakistan and Afghanistan, which can be found on the Web. Realise, however, that everything must be scrutinized for the dangers of bias and simplistic analysis.

Because everything is so volatile, the classroom has become a site of struggle for competing meanings. There is often a tendency for some teachers to perform a monologue/rant, and for some opinionated students to seek only one thing: retributive justice. And our students can tire of excessive talk and analysis. Clearly what is needed are opportunities for creative exercises – simulation games, creative writing, satiric collages and student media productions.

Because there are many aspects mediating the events of Sept 11, we need a multi-perspective approach. The following are a variety of ideas and teaching suggestions. Some will have to be adapted for classroom use. I have incorporated a few ideas from a booklet called *Media and the Gulf War* prepared by the Association for Media Literacy in 1991.



First, we need to establish a useful framework for analysis. I suggest the key concepts of media: the codes and conventions used by the media to tell a story; how the media reflect our ideology and values; the need for the media industry to resonate with large audiences; and how each of us, as part of that audience, interprets the messages received. (A fuller explanation of these key concepts can be found in Barry Duncan, et al., *Mass Media and Popular Culture 2*.) The following critical rationale by Henry Jenkins, a cultural studies professor from M.I.T., also provides a helpful framework for analysis.

“Media events are sites of maximum visibility and maximum turbulence. The media event brings to the surface the values, assumptions, and meanings that are the most central to the belief structure of a particular culture, but it may also have the effect of silencing other values, alternative perspectives, competing bids for meaning. What media analysis tries to do is both locate and explain the meanings that seem to dominate our discussions of a particular event – in this case, issues of nationalism, security, morality, mourning, militarism – and at the same time to locate or describe those meanings which are being pushed aside or forgotten – in this case, perhaps multiculturalism, civil liberties, international cooperation, the humanity of the “enemy.” Media analysis can thus be the tool that can help us understand how the culture is responding to a catastrophe, as well as a tool that can help us recover important ideas and values that need to be heard, as the society deliberates about subsequent actions.

Source: <http://web.mit.edu/cms/reconstructions/introduction.html>

Activities and Analysis

Discourse/Clusters of Ideas

Discourse analysis – how a topic gets taken up, discussed, framed, and culturally internalized – is an invaluable tool for critical analysis. For example, if we looked at how events get filtered through the discourse of patriotism, we could include the following:

- flag mania, from houses draped with huge flags to tiny lapel flags
- military marches played in shopping plazas
- invocations to support patriotic fervour, from leaders like President Bush or Mayor Guiliani. Expressions such as “America is strong,” or “rousing the American spirit”

Apply the following discourses/clusters of ideas to this list, and find your own examples.

- Patriotism. What other filters can you think of?
- Resistance, protest. How does the mainstream portray protest groups?
- Alternative media. What do they uncover? What is their language of analysis?
- Gender and racist responses. Making the case for negotiated responses.
- Terrorism, retaliation vs. negotiation.
- Religious language and sensibility. Examples range from Christian sentiments to the Jihad.
- Democracy, freedom and civilization, anti-Americanism.
- Human rights and social justice.



- Psychotherapy and grieving. Examples are Oprah's advice that "talking cures"; the show's resident therapist, Dr. Phil; Dan Rather breaking down on the "Letterman" show.
- Acts of remembrance and memorial services. Examples may include the use of stars and celebrities on telethons and talk shows.
- Hollywood portrayals. Action films such as *Independence Day* and *The Siege*; westerns such as *High Noon*; and sci-fi post-holocaust films such as *Blade Runner*.

The News



News sources play a major role in shaping our interpretation and understanding of events like these.

Identify the main news sources, from television networks to print journalism.

- What images are missing?
- What other perspectives could be included, but are generally marginalized?
- Compare the performance of American broadcasters such as ABC, NBC, and CBS; and the Canadian broadcasters CBC, CTV, and Global. Consider the following:
 - how the network used news correspondents
 - the extent to which events were sensationalized
 - the background of the experts consulted
 - the image projected by the news anchors
 - the variety of points of view
 - the use of graphics and music

Networks generally showed restraint in avoiding the potential sensationalism of the events, such as seeing people jumping out of windows. In this regard, the media need to be commended for doing a good job. CBC television, with Peter Mansbridge, was thorough and fair-minded in its coverage.

Seeing the second plane that crashed into the south tower and the subsequent fireball was surreal; repeating this image was a nightmarish and iconic media experience that became an obscene spectacle of nauseating repetition.

- How have these images been used by the media? With what effects?
- What are some other memorable images? (The search and rescue operations in the WTC rubble, for instance.)
- Why do you think so many people watched television for several days, almost as if addicted?

For the news to be packaged for maximum impact is inevitable. We expect pleasing personalities of news anchors who are never shown in debate or confrontation; the use of lively graphics and hi-tech studio sets; the reduction of all abstract ideas to extremely simplified versions; and visuals and fast cuts that create high-jolts-per-minute television.

- Under what circumstances are these characteristics of television news desirable?
- When are they unacceptable?
- If you were a network news producer, what would you do?



- What suggestions would you make to the producers of mainstream media about improving their coverage of momentous events?

Media Clips



Follow one or more threads in the media coverage. Use discourse analysis and the key concepts of media to help illuminate the personal and/or political meanings. Examples may include:

- following the trail of the hijackers and perspectives on terrorism
- a variety of portraits of key players, including background on the Taliban and the chief terrorist suspect, Osama bin Laden
- grieving the loss of loved ones
- the economic impact – especially within the airline industry
- responses from one or more countries outside North America
- racial discrimination and hate crimes
- how the entertainment industry copes with the impact of the tragedy
- human interest stories centering on how people recover and begin the process of healing – or, on the other hand, get psychologically worse.

It was communications guru Marshall McLuhan's thesis that each medium codifies reality in different ways, and contains its own technical bias that will foreground different areas of information, thereby revealing different messages.

- Do a comparative media treatment of the coverage on radio, television and print.
- In each case, explain the differences in the dominant messages.

The Role of the Internet

The attack on America revealed the advantages as well as the dangers of the Internet. On the one hand, it has fostered communities where people share their concerns and are provided with up-to-date coverage and commentary from both from mainstream and alternative sources. On the other hand, it has disseminated misinformation and disinformation. Disinformation consists of deliberate spreading of rumours to discredit the enemy, which eventually turn out to be false.

- Share any anecdotes or information you found on the Net that was personally meaningful.
- What were some stories that turned out to be false? (An extensive list of online rumours and hoaxes presently circulating can be found on the Urban Legends Web site, at www.urbanlegends.about.com.)



The Entertainment Business

Business Not as Usual

In the wake of September 11:

- What programs were canceled?
- When did things start to return to normal?
- Did the media show good taste and restraint in making these decisions?
- How will television and theatre producers respond to people's moods since September 11? Will everything become more serious?
- How adept will programs like "The West Wing" be in incorporating the tragic events into their scripts?

Life Imitating Art?

Many commentators have observed that the events of September 11 resembled a movie. *The Siege*, *Independence Day*, and *Air force One*, for example, use plots that contain terrorist attacks on America.

- What is the typical formula of these films?
- What are their dominant values/ideologies?
- At a time when most people are wary of intensifying their emotions, and/or seeing images that resemble real events, why have these films become top video rentals?

Celebrities and Stars

Television tributes such as "America: A Tribute to Heroes" featured stars such as Madonna, Celine Dion, and Clint Eastwood. One critic described the spectacle as "emotionally tasteless."



- Can these events ever be tasteful?
- To what extent do the stars help us to reflect on the events?
- What about the compilations of television highlights overlaid with music: are these exercises in emotional manipulation, or fully justified sentiments?

Other Perspectives

Canada's Response

Traditionally Canada, America's best partner, has cooperated with the United States in times of major crisis. In potential war efforts, however, Canada tends to show restraint.

- Follow Canada's role in the crisis by assessing editorials, bias in news reporting; and through TV specials and major features in newspapers and periodicals.

Alternative Voices

It's important to be aware of marginalized voices in mainstream media, and to seek out sources that offer better representation. Alternative media can play an important role here. Check out US periodicals such as *The Nation*, *Utne Reader*, *Mother Jones*, *Extra*, *Z*, and the Canadian *This*. CBC Television often runs documentaries on the *Passionate Eye*. *Counterspin*, on CBC *Newsworld*, runs controversial forums/debates, Monday to Friday 8:05 - 9 p.m. Vision TV has an



excellent and probing media analysis program, anchored by media critic Barrie Zwicker (Monday 10:30 to 11 p.m.). The following Web sites are invaluable:

- indymedia.com
 - altnet.org
 - comondreams.org
 - straightgoods.com
 - mojones.com
 - thenation.com
 - utne.com
 - salon.com
 - rabble.ca
 - <http://web.mit.edu/CMS/reconstructions/introduction.htm>
- What insights about the coverage do alternative media provide?
 - Consider how peace activists, culture jammers, and various minority groups have responded to the mainstream coverage.

Alternative Voices Found in Mainstream Media

Some media critics point out that even when alternative voices do appear in mainstream media, they're usually positioned, framed, and juxtaposed in ways that marginalize them and reduce their credibility. Look for examples, and determine how successful they were in overcoming the constraints of mainstream media.

Who Gets Marginalized?

According to media analyst Henry Jenkins, what gets pushed aside in a catastrophe charged with sociopolitical meanings is multiculturalism, civil liberties, international cooperation, and the humanity of the enemy. Find examples of these patterns and discuss their implications for social activism. To what extent are anti-globalization groups, peace activists and culture jammers especially vulnerable?

Pundit Power: Round Up the Usual Suspects:

The use of the same pundits on talk shows and the news is predictable – they're usually retired generals. (Could we not let General Schwarzkopf, for example, take a well-deserved rest from recycling his Gulf War memoirs?) Could we not have representatives for pundit panels drawn from peace and social-justice organizations? Who else would offer useful alternative views?

The Values of Town Halls and Special Concerts

In Canada, the CBC's *Town Hall* revealed articulate people receiving justified applause for their common sense and insightful analysis.



Drawing of "Mommy Liberty" from the Web page of 17-year old high school student Eliza Gauger.



On Sept 11, MuchMusic – Canada's music video station – encouraged viewers to talk through e-mail and phone-ins, and had many people dropping into the studio throughout the day. For over seven hours on September 23, MuchMusic featured musicians like Sarah McLaughlin talking with kids in the studio about the tragedy. The end result was the distinctive views of young people, which tend to get ignored by mainstream media.

- In your opinion, what is the value of these encounters?

Fudging the Truth

Doublespeak is not lying, nor is it merely sloppy language; it is the intentional use of euphemisms, synonyms, jargon, and vagueness which pretends to communicate but really does not – or which implies the opposite of what it would appear to communicate.

Metta Winter, *Christian Science Monitor*

- Collect examples of doublespeak, and discuss their emotional and intellectual impact.

False Dichotomies

Central to the discussion of language is seeing the false dichotomies that emerge in any news coverage of a foreign country. This "we/they" pattern idealizes our side and denigrates "the other." Examples: We neutralize. They kill. We launch first strikes. They launch sneak missile attacks. Our boys are cautious and confident. Theirs are cowardly and desperate.

- Discuss these and other current examples.

Information Overload

John Pungente, a Jesuit media educator, made the important case on CBC Radio of the need to talk continually with our friends and colleagues, and to hear other points of view. "We need to listen and at times shut off the TV and radio – which can have a numbing effect that is counter-productive."

- Was there a point when you felt you had overdosed?

The Value of Good Writing

In a crisis, journalists and well-known writers will often do quality reporting or write some profoundly moving, reflective prose. For example, the September 24 edition of the *New Yorker Magazine*, with its memorable black cover, contained short essays by distinguished writers and critics such as Susan Sontag.

- Collect examples of good journalism, and write a short appreciation of why you found them so effective.



Comedy, Satire and the Arts



Critics have asserted that the age of irony has come to an end and that the nature of humour will be forever changed. Are we going to be more sensitive to the traditional territory occupied by comics and satirists?

Check the Web site for The Onion www.theonion.com, which posted light-hearted stories such as "We must retaliate with blind rage." What is your response to their humorous take on the terrorists? Was it funny or in bad taste?

In another artistic medium, Richard Slye, a Toronto collage artist, has done a series of satiric portraits in which Big Macs the size of airplanes, stuffed with the goods of western consumer culture, successfully invade Third World countries. The point should be clear – no weapons are needed. Brainstorm some ways for visual artists, writers and filmmakers to use their response to September 11 as a means of explaining, commenting, interjecting meaning, or rendering into art.

Historical Background

Lessons From the Recent Past

Comparison with other attacks and military campaigns, such as Pearl Harbour and the Gulf War, raises questions about the limitation of thinking by analogy. The differences may be more important than the similarities. However, there are many parallels with the Gulf War.

- Read articles on the coverage of this event. What are some lessons for understanding our current situation?

Examining the American International Track Record

What was excluded from most of the media coverage was the American performance in developing countries. Here are two quotes from well-known culture critics:

The voices licensed to follow the event seem to have joined together to infantilize the public. Where is the acknowledgment that this was no "cowardly" attack on "civilization" or "liberty" or humanity of "the free world," but an attack on the world's self-proclaimed superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions? How many citizens are aware of the ongoing American bombing of Iraq?

Susan Sontag



The United States has become expert in the art of sanitizing and dehumanizing acts of war committed elsewhere. Domestically, war is no longer a national obsession; it's a business that is now largely a national obsession; it's a business that is now largely outsourced to experts. This is one of the country's many paradoxes: in spite of the engine of globalization around the world, the nation has never been more inward-looking, less worldly

Naomi Klein

- What are some telling examples of American alliances and interventions?
- What counter-arguments might those with conservative, Republican leanings use to respond to these observations?
- How could you make the case that in a time of crisis we should put our energy into the present, and not wallow in self-reproach for past actions?

Demonization

Demonizing Arabs and Muslims is an exercise in "othering" – a deliberate way of dehumanizing people we choose not to understand. What is the process for achieving this result in popular culture? The challenge of presenting complex religious issues in the mass media translates into a tendency to make Islam appear strange and exotic.

Sam Keen identifies this pattern in his invaluable book *Faces of the Enemy* (unfortunately) out of print.

In the beginning we create the enemy. Before the weapon comes the image. We think others to death and then invent the battleaxe or the ballistic missiles with which to actually kill them. Propaganda precedes technology.

Sam Keen

- Discuss some recent historical examples of this, including some that have arisen since September 11.

The Final Word

A Pedagogy of Hope and Change

Cyberguru Douglas Rushkoff offers us a comprehensive agenda for both critique and self-renewal in his recent Web site essay, "The War on Networking."



This is an opportunity to take our ongoing struggle for plurality and human creativity to the next level. For more consciousness, not less. For the dismantling of a war machine that is, in part, our own creation. For the spread of values like property ownership and democracy, which lead inevitably towards rule of law and protection of human rights. People need to have something at stake.

This war will be fought on a cultural and ideological level. We must come to understand what conditions lead people to surrender their free will, and to live by decree instead of choice – and then we must fight to eradicate those conditions. We must continue to develop cultural and spiritual tools that help people appreciate the value of human life. We must encourage the notion of free will and free expression, along with the resistance to social programming. We must protect and extend an interactive mediaspace, which promotes collectivism and creativity over isolationism and fundamentalism. It's time to network.

Douglas Rushkoff

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2. Barry Duncan, et. al. (1996) *Mass Media and Popular Culture*. Canada: Harcourt-Brace & Company.

Barry Duncan is an award-winning teacher, author, consultant and founder and past president of the Ontario-based Association for Media Literacy. Co-author of the best selling text book, *Mass Media and Popular Culture*, he has presented workshops and keynote addresses to thousands of teachers in Canada and around the world. You can contact Barry at baduncan@interlog.com.

