

Network Television Broadcasting during U.S. Crises: Its Evolution, Execution, and Effects

Brittany Dewey*

Media Arts & Entertainment, Journalism
Elon University

Abstract

The Kennedy assassination and September 11, 2001: these were the beginnings of two distinctive catastrophic events in U.S. history, both of which were captured by network news stations. The purpose of this research was to determine how and why broadcast production decisions were made during such crises. Six qualitative interviews were conducted with news producers and reporters. These subjective narratives were used to analyze the overall patterns of decision-making at a television station during a catastrophic event. Analyzing techniques involved 1) the identification of production themes within each station and 2) the comparison of these themes to other interviewee accounts. Snowball sampling was used to gather quantitative statistics regarding viewer's opinions on a station's coverage of an iconic event. The sample consisted of 200 viewers across the country. This research found the qualities valued when the stations broke the news of a crisis, as well as determining factors in viewers' preference for a specific network. Production decisions varied based on the network, yet the research discovered a common theme among all networks: Production teams wanted to relay the latest information by showing audiences decent and relative stories. This research discovered multiple themes in order to attempt to explain the significance of the work conducted behind the camera.

I. Introduction

The gun points at the president and discharges a bullet. The plane nosedives straight into dozens of offices. These are the beginnings of two distinctive catastrophes forever ingrained in United States history. Network news stations were there to record as the events unfolded, and they were there as America fell into a time of crisis. The Kennedy assassination set the precedent for how production decisions on the network level are made during crises. Groundbreaking technological developments prepared the broadcast industry to cover the terror attacks on September 11, 2001, yet precisely how those decisions were made are still unclear to the general public. It is through the evolution, execution, and effects of network television broadcasting during United States crises that we can better understand the meaning behind what it is to broadcast during catastrophic events.

II. Literature Review

A variety of scholarly research exists on the role of the mass communication system in delivering the

* **Keywords:** Kennedy assassination, September 11, broadcasting, news decision, catastrophic events
Email: bdewey2@elon.edu

news of United States crises, as well as developments in technology that make such deliverance possible. Yet there is little, if any, concrete academic research regarding the evolution, execution, and effects of network television broadcasting during catastrophic events as portrayed in two events — the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and the terror attacks of September 11, 2001. Based on the completed research focusing on the mass communications system as a whole, conclusions can be drawn pertaining to the effects of each monumental event. The following research has looked at the way broadcast media have approached crises communication.

In their 1977 article, Blackman and Hornstein focused on the ways in which good and bad news impact people's descriptions of human nature as well as their perceptions of others and of themselves. Specifically, their research offered an interpretation of the effects of media messages on people's behavioral choices and their psychological perspectives. One portion of the study was based on undergraduate responses to President Kennedy's assassination. It found that "a person's philosophy of human nature may be changed temporarily by a dramatic piece of information or personal experience" (Blackman, 302). Five days after Kennedy's death, a test about human nature was given to 30 undergraduates who had taken the same survey 14 months prior. About half of them who were the most disturbed by the president's death had become more negative about human nature. Lee Harvey Oswald's actions influenced their expectations and beliefs about the entire social community. It is probable, then, to infer from this presumption that the actions of the terrorists on 9/11 also significantly altered American's regard for human behavior.

Garnett argued that instead of focusing on their effect on the people, the media divert attention to materialistic endeavors. He said that, "crises become opportunities to showcase the capabilities of advanced, virtual communications hardware and software," (Garnett, 177). The application of new technologies and their results became the main interest, instead of the people such a technology intends to reach. These technological developments included telecommunications networks, geographic and spatial information systems, chat rooms and websites. They have already been applied to a number of crisis types including evacuation tracking, terrorist dynamics modeling, and emergency response monitoring. The principal instrumental function within the technology showcase is to apply this knowledge to better crisis handling. Because these technologies were not available, networks could not use them to inform the public of the 1963 assassination. Yet they were effective during 9/11 because in many crisis situations, the only feasible way to disseminate information to those managing and responding to the crisis was through communications technologies.

Another key factor in determining a news station's treatment of crisis communication relies on the media personnel employed at the company. Crisis communication is defined as "the communication between the organization and its publics prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence" (King, 237). King's article suggested that effective crisis management depends upon several team-related factors that may influence an organization's response and its ethical responsibility. He argued that it is more effective to have a team than an individual, which puts the responsibility of the executive producer, or even the news director, into question. Therefore, it can be inferred that a pre-coordinated team and not an individual's judgment decides the execution of network television broadcasting during a time of crisis.

Quarantelli asserted that it is not necessarily a crisis management team that decides a course of action but rather the social requirements in the journalistic world. This world has its own distinctive sets of norms, beliefs, and values on what is news, how news should be handled, and in general how news organizations and journalists ought to look at the world. This in turn determines what, how, and when crises are covered and reported. Yet the quality of reporting is altered during such situations, in ways both positive and negative. Unlike Garnett, Quarantelli argued that the mass media become "personal media" because personal messages are transmitted to listeners concerning their safety and well being (Quarantelli, 13). Based on scholarly findings, these altered protocols share a direct relationship with the way broadcasting during crises affect the American population.

In the weeks following September 11, 2001, the television industry exhibited a new will toward tastefulness as violent, televised movies came under network scrutiny. USA cancelled its primetime run of *The Seige*, and TBS replaced *Lethal Weapon* with movies for family fare such as *Look Who's Talking*. Spigel studied the strategies of the post-9/11 media industry and concluded that television was the medium hit hardest by the conflict between maintaining the image of serving the public's interest and the need to cater to the public taste (Spigel, 236). Implementing nonstop, commercial-free coverage would have cost the television industry gigantic sums of revenue. It would have also arguably taken a toll on its viewers. It can therefore be theorized that crises inflict both positive and negative results on both consumers and networks.

While there is a gap in research between various scholarly articles and the actual topics in question, the research that has been conducted can aid in supplying a greater understanding of the developments, implementation, and results of television broadcasting during the Kennedy assassination and 9/11. This study will use existing studies and interviews to produce a template for understanding crises communication via television that covered arguably two of the most important broadcasting tragedies in the United States since the widespread use of television.

III. Methodology

To explore crisis management in regard to production decisions at television broadcasting stations, this study conducted qualitative personal interviews with four producers and one reporter from both local and network news stations. They had all worked in telecommunications during a time of crisis. The range of professional experience varied from less than a year to nearly half a lifetime.

Interviews, which were composed of 15 questions, were conducted individually and transcribed. Interviewees were asked questions that covered a variety of topics, including major forms of technology that enabled the deliverance of breaking news, how production decisions were made, how to serve the public interest, standard protocol for acceptable footage, ethical considerations, quality of reporting, and the acknowledgment of a crisis' anniversary. These subjective narratives, in combination with a review of previous research, were used to analyze the overall patterns of decision-making at a television station during a catastrophic event. Analyzing techniques involved 1) the identification of production themes within each station that appeared to characterize the interviewee's experience with crisis coverage and 2) the comparison of these themes to other interviewee accounts and current scholarly research.

Snowball sampling was used to express viewer opinions on a station's coverage of an iconic event: specifically the terror attacks on 9/11. The effect of the coverage on surveyed viewers was also studied. The sample consisted of 200 viewers between 18 to 80 years old from multiple parts in the United States including North Carolina, New York, Georgia, Massachusetts, and Michigan. The survey was distributed through social media sites, emails, and group organizations.

Understanding what constitutes a crisis is important. This was done by combining the term's various definition from scholarly research.

In a broad sense, crisis can be defined as "an interruption in the accumulation of capital, or 'system disintegration'" (O'Connor, 1). The dominant neo-Marxist theory of crisis simply describes it as an interruption of normative structures, otherwise known as social disintegration. Crises are also characterized by "high consequence, low probability, and short decision time" (Hale, 1). They can cause destruction to both tangible and intangible assets, such as buildings, machinery, and public image (Ashby, 7). Several other writers focus the word's definition on the threat to key organizational values and stress the limited amount of time in which the catastrophic event unfolds.

For the purpose of this research, crisis was defined as a destructive interruption of high consequence that jeopardizes social integration and its values by demanding incredibly quick decision-making.

IV. The Events

The Kennedy Assassination

The assassination of former president John F. Kennedy was a monumental event for broadcast television. Though it's been studied in classrooms and textbooks, a brief recap of the event is necessary to understand crisis communication and its technological evolution.

It was a year before the 1964 presidential election. President Kennedy was concerned about losing elections from the Solid South, or at least its majority to the Republican Party's nominee. At the end of November 1963, Kennedy visited Texas along his campaign trail in an attempt to gain support. On November 22, Kennedy was scheduled to speak at a luncheon. Kennedy's limousine entered Dealey Plaza and was

greeted by a long line of supporters on either side of the road. As the open-roofed limousine continued down Elm Street, three shots were fired at the president. He was declared dead at Parkland Hospital after suffering a gunshot wound to the head (“JFK Assassination”).

Technological Developments

A television network producer had this to say about covering the crisis: “The most significant stories I can recall have to do with the era of three major TV networks. All programming was to be suspended for on-going coverage.” Before the shooting, WFAA-TV, ABC’s local affiliate, was to provide live coverage of the president’s arrival at Love Field. KRLD-TV, the CBS affiliate, was set up to cover Kennedy’s luncheon speech. Finally, NBC’s affiliate WBAP-TV had done live coverage of Kennedy’s speech in Fort Worth earlier that day. After the shots were fired, ABC was the first network to switch its programming directly to Dallas. Therefore, ABC was the first station to break the news locally. Affiliate WFAA-TV started reporting from the scene of the luncheon Kennedy was supposed to attend. While the affiliate gathered initial facts and reports, the network began to plan its next moves. These moves included sending camera crews, correspondents, videotape facilities, live remote vans, writers, film editors and news dispatchers to Dallas (Lower, 67). But it was a different type of technology that enabled the network to effectively broadcast coverage of the crisis to its viewers.

The studio that ABC originally used for its first live reports on the crisis only had one camera and was therefore inadequate for sustained broadcasting. As a result, the network lost time and efficiency because it was forced to change studios. Yet with the establishment of TV 11, ABC’s main news studio, the network was able to produce more than 36 hours of straight content (Lower, 69). For the first time, ABC-TV’s news department¹ took over and ran the network. Through its coverage of the event and the well-executed “tough decisions ... made under the pressures of time” (Lower, 70) by its producers, the network proved that it could conduct itself responsibly under unprecedented circumstances while remaining conscious of a stunned and distressed nation.

Although ABC was the first to report the murder locally, CBS was the first network to break the news nationally. Ten minutes after Kennedy was shot, CBS interrupted its live broadcast of *As the World Turns* with a news bulletin. Anchor Walter Cronkite delivered an audio-only report, meaning that he did not appear on screen as the news was read (Trost). This was because the studio did not have a camera available at the time, a mistake that would be unheard of today. Twenty minutes later, CBS obtained a camera and Cronkite appeared on air. Following the official announcement of Kennedy’s death, all three networks cancelled their regular programming and commercials for the first time in television’s brief history². According to a New York Times article, the assassination of President Kennedy was the longest uninterrupted news event in the history of American television, until the networks were on air for 72 hours straight covering the terrorist attacks in 2001 (Carter, A14).

September 11, 2001

The terror attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, were arguably the greatest forms of American crisis since the assassination of a former United States president. During the early morning of the 11th, 19 al-Qaeda terrorists hijacked four commercial passenger jet airlines. Two of the airplanes were intentionally flown into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, while the third plane crashed into the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia. The fourth airliner crashed into a field in rural Pennsylvania, though it was intended to hit Washington, D.C.

Network Coverage

The first television report of an incident at the World Trade Center was broadcast by WNYW, a local New York station, less than two minutes after the first plane crashed into the North Tower. One minute later, CNN was the first network to broadcast the information, followed by MSNBC. The author found that a plurality of respondents (41.5%) reported watching CNN throughout the day, as well as days following. They cited “CNN seems to be the most reliable and has the most in-depth coverage of news stories,” “It’s unbiased,” and it offers “good reporting.” This is concurrent with previous studies completed by the Pew Research Center Report, which concluded that CNN was the most popular news source to get information about the attacks³.

1 ABC-TV was composed of a news department, sports, programming, sales, et cetera – but in the time following the assassination, the station’s content was completely controlled by news.

2 Television was still considered “new” during this time, as it had only been around for less than 40 years.

3 “Terror Coverage Boost News Media’s Images.”

Technological Developments

News tickers, occasionally referred to as crawlers, are defined as a small screen space on broadcast news networks dedicated to presenting headlines. Multiple networks had used tickers in years prior to 2001; however, it was the September 11 attacks that made the ticker an omnipresent part of a newscast. Fox News Channel was the first station to place a ticker on screen at 10:49 a.m. This allowed the network to provide a continuous stream of vital emergency information to viewers. CNN followed with a ticker at 11:11 a.m. By using the ticker, news stations were able to show images of one event while printing information for another issue (Bremen). Since the attacks, management at Fox, CNN, and MSNBC — the three major news channels of September 11 — implemented the tickers as permanent features during newscasts. These developments allowed networks to increase the dissemination of news in a way that is more intelligible and efficient for viewers. Today, cable news frequently uses news tickers to let viewers offer their opinions on the stories being covered. For example, News12 Long Island displays a ticker throughout its half-hour long show Long Island Talks that encourages audiences to call in and voice their thoughts on the day's topic.

Impact of crisis coverage on viewers

Not only did the events on September 11 affect the nation, but the ways in which broadcast news delivered the day's content also impacted audiences. This research studied television's impact on its viewers, as well as the viewer's impact on its ratings.

More than half (53%) of those surveyed for this research thought that a more subtle and neutral approach to relaying breaking news is the most effective way to get the news across. This could explain why a plurality of respondents turned to CNN during the attacks because of the network's more subtle and neutral layout. This can be contrasted to a vivacious and bold style reflective of Fox News Channel's broadcasts, which 39% of respondents preferred. When watching the coverage of a crisis, a majority (59%) of viewers said they felt informed (See *Figure 1*). This compares to 4.5% who felt uninformed. A plurality of respondents (46%) also reported feeling stressed while watching a station's coverage of a national crisis. Although most respondents acknowledged watching CNN during September 11, 54% said there is not a certain network they would turn to during a time of crisis. Forty-six percent said they would watch a specific network. The results from the following question are consistent with respondents' indifferent attitude toward selecting a particular station for crisis information. When asked if they were more likely or less likely to rely on that network during the next crisis, 44% of viewers reported they were neither more nor less likely to tune to the same network for a different crisis. However, only three percent fewer viewers (41%) were more likely to stay with a consistent network during a catastrophic event.

It can be inferred that feeling "stressed" and "informed" were the most popular responses because of the ways in which broadcast news impacted its audience. One respondent noted that he/she felt informed because during a crisis, such as September 11, stations were delivering raw facts from the scene as they happened, as opposed to potentially interlacing the facts among a more complicated story. In fact, more reporters from ABC, CBS, CNN, and NBC reported objective, factual information during the attacks (Reynolds, 697). This reflects the method of a traditional journalist. However, if the journalist assumed a social commentator role, then personal attitudes, values, or beliefs could influence content. Receiving information in this manner allowed another respondent to feel informed because the news connected viewers with the rest of the world during a major event. However, certain aspects of network coverage, as well as typical human behavior, caused many viewers to feel predominately stressed during a time of American crisis.

Wilbur Schramm studied viewer stress during the Kennedy assassination and concluded that monitoring

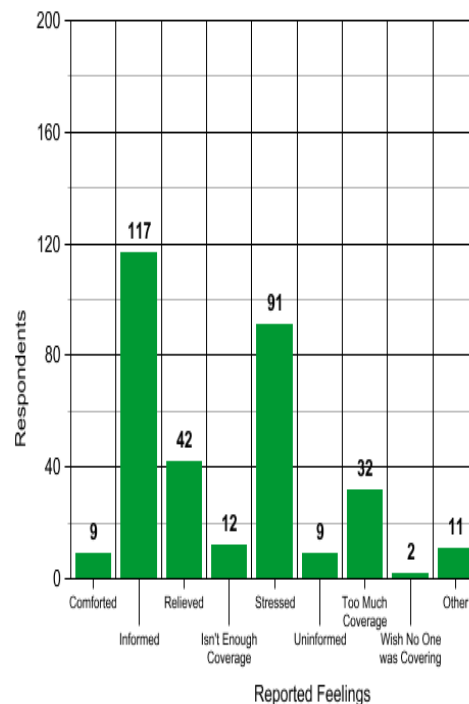


Figure 1. Feelings while watching crisis coverage

a crisis through television news can reduce stress related to the crisis (Reynolds, 700). This author's current study disproved this conclusion. Instead, the research showed stress was another popular feeling among respondents for two reasons. 1) It is a natural response of human behavior, particularly repeatedly watching planes fly into towers. "The impact of witnessing the collapse of the World Trade Center over and over again has to have a negative influence on the anxiety and anger levels of the public" (Waters, 59). The combination of repeatedly showing emotional images, as well as the style of the newscast, can also influence a stressed response in viewers. One respondent expressed the opinion that the continuous use of graphics or phrases such as 'more in a minute' was more stressful than helpful. Yet regardless of viewers' opinion, the coverage of the September 11 attacks brought in higher ratings than networks had seen in quite a while.

Impact of crisis coverage on ratings

The crisis that unfolded on September 11 had a profound impact on national network ratings. A week prior to the attacks, Nielsen Media Research registered about 13% of American adults watched an evening newscast. That percentage more than doubled (26%) in the week of September 10-16, 2001. The research later suggested that 79.5 million viewers were tuning in to any of the main broadcast or cable networks on the night of the attacks (Althaus, 518). The media's approval ratings reached a record high as well. According to a Pew Research Center report, 89% of Americans gave the media a positive rating for their reporting efforts during September 11.⁴ Other United States crises, including the Oklahoma City bombing, also resulted in record-high ratings. Nielsen reported that in 1995, CNN's coverage of the bombing drastically raised its ratings because of the 133 million viewers. Therefore, it is concluded that crisis coverage significantly increases a network's ratings.

V. The Execution of Production Decisions during Crises

In her study concerning the challenges of communication during crisis response, Joanne Hale asserts that crises "create a unique and threatening decision-making environment that must be conscientiously supported" (Hale, 235). This is especially accurate in the world of broadcast journalism. For this research, producers from both network and local news stations were interviewed about issues concerning broadcasting in the public interest, ethical decision making, and making production decisions during a crisis.

How are production decisions made during a time of crisis? John Piranian is a producer at a New York station. He answered, "Decisions are made in a split second. The nature of breaking news is to do as you go and try to best plan the next step." This is because producers and executive producers are trying to get the latest and most accurate information out to people; they are also trying to accompany that information with the best available images they can find. Dave North is a producer who works with John. Dave said that the executive producer and the news director — both of whom "assess the people and resources available" — make these decisions. Samantha, a producer in North Carolina, offered a more generalized answer. "The whole newsroom generally comes together to make decisions as a collective unit, but it's always on the fly. Suggestions may come from managers, but it has to be organized, and ultimately called by, the producer."

Understanding a news station's standard plan of action during crisis coverage leads to a deeper comprehension of how and why certain decisions are made. To obtain such information, producers were asked to explain the chain of events that ultimately led to an informative newscast, as well as the most appropriate plan of action for announcing a crisis. Kevin described a consecutive chain of events. The station hears about the situation through scanners, viewer phone calls or emails, the wires, or a competitor's newscast. Journalists then work to get the situation confirmed so that the newscast can report the event and follow up with developments. John said the following about the most appropriate plan of action for announcing September 11: "You get on the air as soon as possible — as soon as you have information you can definitely go with. For 9-11, you have the anchor explain the situation then keep updating as more information pours in. When it's something really big like 9-11 ... you can't be showing another story. Nothing else matters in moments like that." John also said, "The most effective thing to do is to have the entire news team working toward the same goal — getting out the latest information." This information must be pertinent to network viewers.

One of a producer's main concerns while televising a national crisis is to ensure the network is appealing to the public interest. As is true in most crisis situations, the public's priority is safety during such a time. By understanding this aspect, it is simpler to comprehend how a producer determines what to air

4 "American Psyche Reeling from Terror Attacks," 1.

while considering the greater interests at hand. John explained, “It’s crucial to get as much out to the people as possible because we have the ability to mobilize people in the event of an evacuation, or inform people of potentially dangerous situations in their area.” During September 11, the main goal was to keep people informed. This also included getting “informed analysis about what could happen next and what steps folks can take to stay safe” (Piranian). Kevin Kline, a producer in North Carolina, believes reflecting internally on the issues at hand can prepare the producer for a stronger newscast. “You have to ask yourself the questions that determine public interest — Was anyone hurt? Is the shooter still out there? Those questions judge the public’s interest — how much they’ll care — and the public interest — how much they should care.”

How much a viewer cares is closely related to the ways in which news networks decide the most effective way of getting the message across. Samantha Miller, a producer at Fox 8, put it simply. “Visually — we are a visual medium. Especially in cases of crisis, sometimes there aren’t words to say exactly how bad a situation is.” Typically, when important information needs to be shared, compelling video exists. This was especially true during September 11. “That video speaks without words” (Miller). Dave explained that the best way to deliver high-impact messages is to keep the writing simple, where as Kevin believes “the most effective way to pass along a message is with every medium possible.” This includes putting the broadcast on the air, web, Twitter, Facebook, cell phones, etc.

Network reporters have a heavy influence on how effectively the information surrounding a crisis is being reported to a station’s viewers. This led to one of my research questions: How does continuous coverage of a crisis affect the quality of reporting? Amy Reynolds’ study showed that during September, CBS spent the most time performing the functions of the traditional journalist, followed by ABC and NBC. This is considered a “good” journalism practice, compared to reporters from NBC who spent the most time making social commentary or reporting rumors (Reynolds, 696). Drew Scott, a senior reporter in New York, gave an unpredictable answer to this question during his interview. He said, “I think the quality of reporting initially is sketchy, shallow, and sometimes inaccurate until the full scope of a breaking news story is understood. Once [the production team] realizes the story’s parameters, the quality improves and becomes even more high quality than normal because of the time we can spend on just one story.” The producer interviews resulted in a more indefinite response. John thinks the quality of reporting “increases because it’s all we’re focusing on. Reporters, anchors, producers, and writers become familiar with the topic so we end up delivering a more focused product.” Kevin, however, says it most likely decreases because the writing can become stale. With regard to reporting during September 11, Samantha said, “Continuous coverage was necessary even though we didn’t have any information. The media had to constantly watch the situation because that was what the American public needed. They needed to experience it, even if the media couldn’t as a populous wrap our heads around what was actually going on.”

Regardless of the media’s comprehension, or lack thereof in relation to covering a national crisis, the field of journalism’s standard of ethics remains intact. According to the Society of Professional Journalists, the main points of a reporter’s code of ethics include seeking the truth and reporting it, minimizing harm, acting independently, and being accountable (“SPJ Code of Ethics”). The author studied whether or not a news network’s code of ethics strengthens or becomes more lax during continuous coverage. Examples of ethical considerations to be aware of during the broadcast include identifying a victim before family verification, or interfering with police investigation by its coverage. Dave said, “A good team keeps consistently high standards as a matter of practice. That way, that’s how you’ll do business under all circumstances.” Kevin concurs, saying that, “Our ethical standards are important no matter the story.” This parallels Samantha’s response, which was “You have to be fair.” Other ethical considerations, such as what footage is acceptable to broadcast, became major considerations faced by network producers.

In referencing the broadcast of September 11, Jill Geisler, a writer for the Radio Television Digital News Association, said, “You could see the conscious decision of directors; stay with the pictures. This was not a day to see the faces of anchors. Viewers needed to see the towers, the Pentagon” (Geisler). Eventually, however, executive producers and news directors made the ethical decision to discontinue airing such graphic content. This research studied the process behind this decision making by asking: What is the protocol for what footage is acceptable to air during a crisis? Each producer responded with one set answer: A station will not show dead bodies. John elaborated, saying, “We don’t want to put out any images that are gratuitous, like people jumping from the Twin Towers. We know it’s a story about death and destruction, so we don’t need to show specific instances of it.” Dave explained another decision-making process. Producers ask themselves, “Does it tell the story, or just grab attention? Good actualities do both.” These actualities are likely the ones

viewers will see when newscasts are commemorating the anniversary of a crisis.

John, Dave, Kevin, and Samantha unanimously agreed on the treatment of the anniversary of a national crisis. Kevin put it simply: “We cover them.” Yet they were covered slightly different than a typical hard news story. Dave explained, “Acknowledging anniversaries is a demonstration of respect. But it can be a balancing act as the catastrophe recedes.” Producers are concerned with investigating fresh issues associated with the crisis. For example, years after September 11 occurred, networks reported on the struggle for health insurance for emergency responders. John elaborated, saying, “We certainly mark somber anniversaries to show where we’ve come and what still needs to be addressed.” Samantha addresses the emotions behind the event. “Major national disasters are remembered ... with a current story of how someone’s remembering the event of honoring the person.” Based on this research, producers are not planning on discontinuing the commemoration of such crises. John said, “I’m sure we’ll be covering the 9-11 anniversary for many years, if not decades to come.”

VI. Conclusion

The assassination of former president John F. Kennedy was a monumental event in broadcast television history. It was the first time that the American public fully relied on the reporting skills of those operating major network stations both in front of, and behind, the camera. It challenged network employers because before 2001, it was the longest run of uninterrupted programming in broadcast history. Technological developments, including the construction of multiple studios, expanded network’s broadcast abilities and enabled news anchors to relay more current information to a wider range of viewers. As a result of televising the Kennedy assassination, news networks were able to better prepare for the next major national crisis: September 11.

The survey conducted for this research found that a plurality of respondents watched CNN on the day of the terror attacks. Based on these results, as well as other scholarly studies, it can be concluded that CNN was viewers’ network of choice during the crisis because it was the first channel to break the information. Survey respondents also noted a preference for CNN’s subtle breaking news style. This is another conclusion that can be drawn as to why audiences chose to watch a particular network. As it was determined in personal interviews with producers, viewers valued immediacy, accuracy and relativity, all of which survey respondents acknowledged recognizing in CNN’s reports. New forms of technology, such as continuous news tickers, strengthened the deliverance of these vital qualities. September 11 permanently influenced the way that broadcast news delivers stories because it made news tickers a standard element in network newscasts. It is also possible to draw conclusions about how and why certain production decisions are made during times of crisis.

After analyzing the transcripts from the interviews of four different producers, this study found the following assertions: 1) Regardless of the potential impact of a national crisis, only one or two people decide the content a network broadcasts. This is because executive producers and news directors are trained to make such decisions in compromising situations: it is what they are hired to do. 2) There is one goal for news organizations: relay the latest information. The methods of how to do so remain considerably open for interpretation, so long as they remain within the network’s code of ethics. 3) Safety is always in the public’s interest. Since news stations have the ability to mobilize, or immobilize people during a crisis, they must provide consistent updates. In such situations, the media bears witness to the event and is therefore a viewer’s sole source of safety information and evacuation plans. 4) During a crisis, a network’s ethical standards remain the same: accuracy before anything. 5) Production teams want to show audiences a story, not offend them. This explains the decisions behind ceasing to air the planes crashing into the towers: “It’s scary enough without showing the most horrific moments over and over again” (Piranian).

Understanding the execution of production decisions during a national crisis is a task that arguably will never be completely comprehended by anyone not employed at a news station. Yet this research discovered the previous themes in order to attempt to explain the significance of the work conducted behind the camera. Future research may address more developing trends in production decisions, particularly with the creation of future technologies and broadcast mediums. However, one overarching theme will remain constant throughout broadcast history: The public depended on television as their medium for crisis information then, and now.

Acknowledgements

This author is thankful to Dr. David Copeland at Elon University for his support and guidance in getting this thesis published. The author also appreciates the numerous reviewers who have helped revise this article.

Bibliography

- Althaus, S. (2002). American News Consumption during Times of National Crisis. *Political Science and Politics*, 35(3), 517-521.
- Ashby, S. & Diacon, S. (2000). Strategic Rivalry and Crisis Management. *Risk Management*, 2(2), 7-15.
- Blackman, J. A. & Harvey, A. H. (1977). Newscasts and the Social Actuary. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 3(41), Oxford University Press.
- Bremen, S. (2010, Nov 13). Ticker News (and other public, influencing and influential juxtapositions). Sarah Bremen |work and research. Retrieved from <http://www.sarabremen.org/2009/08/ticker-news-and-other-public-influencing-and-influential-juxtapositions/>
- Carter, B. & Rutenberg, J. (2001, Sept 15). Viewers Again Return to Traditional Networks. *The New York Times*, A14.
- Garnett, J. L. (2007). Communicating throughout Katrina: Competing and Complementary Conceptual Lenses on Crisis Communication. *Public Administration Review*, Spec ed(67).
- Geisler, J. (2010, Oct). Covering Terror and Tragedy. Radio Television Digital News Association, Retrieved from http://www.rtdna.org/pages/media_items/covering-terror-and-tragedy291.php?id=291
- Hale, J. (1997). A Layered Communication Architecture for the Support of Crisis Response. *Journal of Management Information Systems*, 14(1), 235-55.
- King, G. (2002). Crisis Management & Team Effectiveness: A Closer Examination. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 3(41).
- Kline, K. (2010 Nov 07). Interview by Brittany Dewey.
- Lower, E. (1965). A Television Network Gathers the News. *The Kennedy Assassination and the American Public: Social Communication in Crisis*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Mary Ferrell Foundation. (2005). JFK Assassination. Retrieved Nov 12, 2010, from: http://www.maryferrell.org/wiki/index.php/JFK_Assassination
- O'Connor, J. L. (1981). The Meaning of Crisis. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 5(3), 301-29.
- Quarantelli, E.L. (2002). *The Role of the Mass Communication System in Natural and Technological Disasters and Possible Extrapolation to Terrorism Situations* (3rd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan Journals.
- Reynolds, A. & Barnett, B. (2003). This Just In...How National TV News Handled the Breaking "Live" Coverage of September 11. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 80(3), 689-703.
- Society of Professional Journalists. (1996). SPJ Code of Ethics. Retrieved Nov 18 2010, from: <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>
- Spigel, L. (2004). Entertainment Wars: Television Culture after 9/11. *American Quarterly*, 2(56). The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Trost, C. & Bennett, S. (2003). *President Kennedy has been Shot*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc.
- Waters, J. (2002). Moving Forward from September 11: A Stress/Trauma/Crisis Response Model. *Brief Treatment and Crisis Intervention*, 2(1), 55-74.
-