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A Content Analysis of the TV Networks Coverage of The 9/11 Incident during the First Eight Hours

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**Media in a Crisis Situation Involving National Interest:  
A Content Analysis of the TV Networks Coverage of  
The 9/11 Incident during the First Eight Hours**

by

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## **Abstract**

A content analysis of coverage of 9/11 incident during the first eight hours examined how five television networks framed the news coverage as events unfolded. Media performed their function in a crisis basically as they were expected and coverage and issues do not vary significantly among the networks. This study found that a variety of sources was used, and the influence of government officials was not as great as in the coverage of a crisis with less involvement of U.S. national interest. Media primarily serve as the sources of accurate information instead of guidance and consolation in the crisis. Human interest was not found to be a dominant frame in the coverage, even though the crisis involved human casualties. Dominant frames were associated with the dominant theme of the incident. The stage of a crisis was an important factor determining the coverage frames. Coverage frames changed over different stages as the unfolding event brought attention to new issues.

## **Introduction**

On September 11, 2001, continuous television coverage by CNN, ABC, NBC, CBS and FOX News of the most aggressive terrorist attack on America to date began within seconds of the initial plane crash into the North Tower at 8:45 EST. Viewers saw the incident as it unfolded, a national disaster resulting in unimaginable death tolls, destruction of buildings and disruption of normal life processes (Greenberg, Hofschire and Lachlan, 2001). To keep up with the latest development of events, people turned on their televisions and kept them on (The Pew Research Center, 2001). According to one study, 91 percent said television news was a useful source of information about terrorism and 69 percent said it was the most useful source (Stempel and Hargrove, 2001). Another study found that Americans were generally satisfied with the coverage television gave them on that day (The Pew Research Center, 2001; WestGroup Research, 2001).

Much research has been devoted to determining how news media frame information so that it affects our understanding and interpretation of issues. The series of events on 9/11 posed a unique opportunity to understand how television networks handled coverage in a situation in which they were thrust without warning, and in some cases, placed in harm's way. If the general reaction of the public was that television did a good job informing America about the crisis, then the question we wanted to answer was, what did the television media do that responded to the needs of the American viewer during a crisis when the national interest was at stake? We are particularly interested in how the different networks framed the content of television news coverage as events unfolded.

## Literature Review

After examining crisis events that affected the national interest during the last one-hundred years, sociologist Arthur Neal described them as follows:

An extraordinary event becomes a national trauma under circumstances in which the social system is disrupted to such a magnitude that it commands the attention of all major subgroups of the population. Even those who are usually apathetic and indifferent to national affairs are drawn into the public arena of discussion and debate. The social fabric is under attack, and people pay attention because the consequences appear to be so great that they cannot be ignored (1998, p. 9-10).

When the social order is seriously disrupted, people usually desire more information than the media can provide. If there is not enough information or if people do not trust the media, they talk with each other in an attempt to make sense of the crisis. “The major task, individually and collectively, is that of integrating the traumatic event into the fabric of social life in order to make it less threatening” (p. 12). Selecting examples from crisis situations that have been studied extensively (the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963, racial riots in North Carolina 1967, the war in Israel 1973 and radio news during a series of floods and tornadoes), Doris Graber concluded that during crises, the public becomes almost totally dependent on the media for news that may be vital for survival and for important messages from public and private authorities. They look to the media for information, explanations and interpretations (1980, p.228). The National Research Council Committee on Disasters and the Mass Media postulated that the press had the following functions during a crisis: 1) warning of predicted or impending disasters; 2) conveying information to officials, relief agencies and the public; 3) charting the progress of relief and recovery; 4) dramatizing lessons learned for purpose of future preparedness; 5) taking part in long term public education programs and 6)

defining slow-onset problems as crises or disasters (1978, p.10).

Graber's suggestion that there are three stages of crisis coverage by media seems to echo these functions (1980, p. 229). During the first stage, when the disaster strikes, media correspondents, officials and onlookers rush to the scene. Since media is the prime source, not only for the general public, but also for the public officials concerned with the crisis, its key roles are to describe what has happened and to help coordinate the relief work. Its top priority is to get accurate information, which, even if it is bad news, relieves uncertainty and calms people. If the news gives people the sense that authorities are coping appropriately with the disaster, this, too, is reassuring (p. 233-234). For example, scenes of plane crashes become less frightening if police, firefighters, or other government officials are on the scene. In the second stage, media coverage of events focuses on making sense out of the situation. Plans are formulated and implemented to address the needs of the victims and to repair the damage. Graber suggested that the third stage overlaps with the first two. In an effort to provide context, the role of media is to place the crisis in a larger, longer-term perspective. A major task is to prevent panic, to urge people to stay calm, and to give guidance for appropriate behavior.

Journalists filter information in ways that affect an audience's understanding or interpretation of issues, stories or events (Lowrey, p. 327). By selecting out facts from a continuous flow of information, they have the ability to influence attitudes, beliefs and behavior in a number of ways that include emphasizing specific issues or events over others, determining the order of presentation, using repetition and determining the nature of support for information. Nimmo and Combs, (1985) have studied television coverage of national crises by examining programs about the Peoples Temple, Three Mile Island,

Flight 191, Mount St. Helens, Hostages in Iran and the Tylenol poisonings. They found that news provided information, but it was also presented from a point of view in ways that changed the viewer's understanding or interpretation of events and evoked emotions (pp. 17-18). McCombs and Shaw (1997) concluded that media direct our attention to specific events and issues by providing information about. Taking this a step further, others found that media use a "narrow range of perspectives" or "frames" that help people organize and understand new information (McCombs, 1997). These frames provide a way to think and talk about events and issues. Entman (1991, p. 52), for example, described this process as selecting ". . . some aspects of a perceived reality and [making] them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described." Framing, then, can be described as a story angle or hook; it is "the central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events and weaves a connection among them" (Gamson, 1993, p.15).

From another perspective, using frames helps the receiver of the news interpret and evaluate information by making it familiar (Norris, 1995, p. 259). These frames help journalists prioritize information in terms of what seems to be relevant and newsworthy and create agendas. Examples of common frames are the horse race frame used in political races, the black/white racial frame that often surfaces in riot coverage and the dictatorship/democracy frame used in foreign policy discussions (p. 357). According to Iyengar, the episodic frame, or presenting an individual, stand-alone news story, is more common than the use of thematic frame (1993). Entman) noted that key words, sources and sentences form thematic clusters (p. 6-27. These frames develop primarily at the site

of the reporter-source relationship, where (eventual) agreement on the nature of the story between the two is assumed.

Framing analysis usually has three approaches: the effect of journalistic norms, values, or organizational structures; actual news content; and the effects of news frames on the public's understanding of issues or events (Norris, p. 360). This study is interested in exploring the second of these approaches. A number of studies have focused on news content and how it is framed (Entman, 1993; Fico et al., 2001; Iyengar, 1993; Nacos, 1994; Norris, 1995; Pan et al., 1993; Tewksbury et al., 2000; Ungar, 1998). Nacos analyzed the content of CBS Evening News and *The New York Times*' terrorism coverage of the Iranian hostage crisis, the TWA hijacking, the Achille Lauro highjacking, the American air raids on Libya, and the destruction of Pan Am flight 103 (1994). Ungar (1998), Herzog (2000), Simon (1993), and Entman (1991) analyzed news stories about crises. Network coverage of international news has also been studied extensively (Gonzenbach et al., 1992; Larson, 1984; Norris, 1995; Entman, 1991). These studies and others found that news themes and issues change over time; emphasis on a theme or issues can be determined by number, length and story order, and that certain common themes are used to frame the coverage of news (Norris, 1995, p. 361). In addition, Ungar's research indicates that media can shift framing strategies from presenting frightening information to a containment or calming approach when "dread-inspiring events are developing in unpredictable and potentially threatening ways" (Ungar, 1998, p. 36).

The research also seems to indicate that four issue frames are more common than others: the conflict frame, the human interest frame, the responsibility frame and the



economic frame (Valkenburg et al, 551). Iyengar (1987, 1989, 1991) examined television newscasts' presentation of five issues: crime, terrorism, poverty, unemployment, and racial inequality. He concluded that networks frame newscasts in episodic or thematic terms by "[depicting] public issues in the form of concrete instances or specific events." He found that "a relationship between media frames and audience frames is strongly contingent upon the issue under study" (Iyengar, 1993, p. 369). Shoemaker and Reese (1996, p.5) discovered that five factors may influence how journalists frame an issue: social norms and values, organizational pressures and constraints, pressures of interest groups, journalistic routines, and ideological or political orientations of journalists. Semetko and Valkenburg (1999) used content analysis to determine how news related to politics or political themes in Europe were framed (550-567). Their findings indicated that the responsibility frame was the frame most frequently used, followed by the conflict frame. Economic and human interest frames were significantly lower in use.

Other studies have examined the role of sources in framing (Andsager, 1999; Nacos, 1994; Colby and Cook, 1991). After analyzing the press's role in reporting terrorism (Iran hostage crisis 1979-81, TWA hijacking in 1985, hijacking of Achille Lauro in 1985), Brigitte Nacos makes the case that media use different methods when covering an anti-American terrorist act than when covering other foreign policy issues. Rather than relying on traditional administrative sources, media call on a variety of sources including terrorists and their allies, families of the victims, and critics of the establishment (Nacos, 1994). In their examination of nightly news coverage, Colby and Cook found that ". . .the typical AIDS story tended less to sensationalize than to reassure, largely because journalists depended on government officials and high-ranking

doctors to present them with evidence of news” (1991). Fico and Freedman (2001) determined through a content analysis of 402 hard-news stories on the 1998 governor’s race in Michigan that the candidates and their supporters had more impact than issue experts or other sources in determining story leads and beginning paragraphs.

The role of journalistic norms, values and press professionalism has also been a focus of framing studies (Tewksbury, 2000). Common journalistic themes and perspectives are objectivity, gathering as much information as possible, giving both sides equal time, independence and accurate sourcing (Tewksbury). However, after examining the elite press coverage of the 1986 U.S - Libya conflict, Hertzog concluded that “administration press management [the influence of the current national leadership] had greater impact on coverage of the Libya crisis in the United States than did either public patriotism [support of the U. S. administration] or press professionalism” (p. 623).

The selection of issues and the emphasis they receive tend to differ among media, but all forms of media include information on the principal issues (Lowery, 341). In their study of the coverage of national politics, Shaw and McComb (1997) found that, “For the most part, we know only those aspects of national politics considered newsworthy enough for transmission through the mass media” (p.7). Gerbner’s content analyses of selected network fall prime-time and Saturday-morning programming in 1967-68 found that violent programming was present in large doses on all three networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC), but that the networks differed in the amount of violent programming (p. 327). The Media Institute (1983) conducted a content analysis of evening news coverage of the tax-increase 1982 bill and found that there were significant differences between the business and economic coverage of CNN and the other networks. In the category of

balance, CNN devoted less time to government sources (CNN 38%, Networks 47%) and to the “men in the street”(CNN 8%, Networks 17%), but CNN gave more time to economists, who in this case were experts (CNN 12%, Networks 3%). CNN was seen as less sensational than the networks. On the other hand, CNN had less depth. There were no significant differences between CNN and the other networks when evaluating news priority.

The studies that we have reviewed indicated that story lines would differ as the crisis unfolded; government sources would play a major role; stories would be framed differently upon the issues covered; some frames would be more common than others; and that the different networks would be similar in the principal issues presented. While the findings of these studies offer insight to the coverage pattern of some important issues and under the situation of a crisis, few of these studies used more than one television network in their research paradigm. The stage in the coverage of a crisis is a key factor influencing the frame of coverage, but few of the studies looked at the media framing with a dynamic view as introducing the variable coverage stage, let alone mapped continuous coverage by story during the first, intense hours of a breaking crisis.

Larson (1984) and others have conducted a systematic content analysis of network news and found no significant difference in the coverage of international news among the major networks; this research, however, does not include CNN and FOX News. With previous research supporting the hypothesis that frames develop primarily at the site of the reporter-source relationship and given the chaotic environment during the first eight hours after 9/11 incident took place, determining what reporters selected for broadcast coverage in this unprecedented situation and exploring what are the key factors

influencing media coverage frames are even more compelling research objectives.

Based on the literature and previous research, we proposed the following hypotheses:

H1: Media rely more on government sources than other sources in a crisis situation.

H2: Media advocate American values in a crisis situation involving national interest.

H3: Media emphasize human interest in crisis situation involving tragedy more than other political and economic factors.

H4: Media coverage frame changes during the different stages of crisis.

H5: Media coverage shift focus on key issues during the different stages of a crisis.

The study will also answer the following research questions:

Q1: Are certain sources relied upon more in one frame than another?

Q2: Is there a difference in coverage frame among the networks?

## **Method**

This study uses content analysis to examine the first eight hours of network coverage of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. The content of the network news coverage was examined as a consequence of news organizations' decision making in a crisis situation that affects the national interest. At the individual level, the content reflected editors' application of news judgment.

Individual stories are the consequences of reporter news judgement, interaction with both purposive and nonpurposive sources and decisions on how the story should be reported (Westley and McClean, 1957, pp. 31-38). The result of content analysis also offers an indispensable foundation for further analysis of the role of television during a national crisis. The study is a part of an ongoing study of how the networks covered the

September 11 crisis. The intent of the project is to describe the content and interview newsmakers at all five networks. This study focuses on a subset of that sample.

The news coverage of five network stations, ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN and FOX News, was selected for content analysis. These networks were selected because of their dominant status in television news coverage in the United States. They also include three different types of television media: the established wireless television network, cable television network and a relatively new, independent television network. The first eight hours were chosen based on the following considerations: 1) the time period contains the most important stages of the incident, 2) the time period contains the most intensive coverage of the incident, and 3) the time period reflects changes in media coverage due to the rapid development of the incident.

The news content of the five television networks recorded in twenty tapes was acquired through Vanderbilt University's video library. A total of 1117 stories were identified from the first 8 hours coverage of the 5 networks, including 303 stories from ABC, 192 stories from CBS, 184 stories from NBC, 232 stories from CNN and 206 stories for FOX News.

The study unit is the news story. The story is defined as a group of studio and field shots that specifically address one topic or issue and run consecutively. The story can start with or without the lead from the anchor or it can be a story solely reported by the anchor or a reporter. The actual news coverage runs consecutively, without clear segments of stories. For the purpose of content analysis, the following cues were used to identify a story: 1) a switch from the anchor to the field reporter, or vice versa; or 2) a scene change, and the voice over of a different reporter; or 3) the anchor or reporter

changed the topic and started reporting on a different aspect of the event instead of mentioning something briefly, and the coverage of the topic ran for a significant amount of time (at least 30 seconds). The actual stories identified ran from 30 seconds to 12 minutes.

The recording unit of the content analysis includes words, phrases, sentences and themes identified for measuring attributes in the coverage. The key variables coded included stage of coverage, content orientation, coverage frame, patriotism demonstrated and value emphasized. The coding procedures also identified the topics and key issues in the coverage. A source was recorded according to the frequency that a name of a person or an organization was associated with direct or indirect quotes. Time allocation was recorded as the actual time or length of the story.

The first eight hours of coverage was divided into three stages according to Graber's suggestion (1980): first stage, 8:48 a.m. to 11:00 a.m.; second stage, 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.; and third stage, 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. The determination of content orientation was based on whether the story consisted primarily of 1) facts; 2) analysis of information, facts, or events; 3) consoling or comforting words; or 4) guidance.

Following Entman's (1991) definition, the coverage frame is defined as the aspects of a perceived reality identified through a story, which make these aspects more salient in the news coverage. The frame was identified through the story angle or story focus. For example, if a story dealt with national security, government policy, or international relations, it was considered to have a political frame; a story discussing economic impact had an economic frame and a story reporting about human feeling, human well-being, family or love was an human interest frame.

Five coders were trained by using a unified coding protocol and by following the prescribed procedures by Daniel Riffe *et al.* (1998). Ten percent of the coding content was used for intercoder reliability check.<sup>1</sup> Scott's Pi was used to test the intercoder reliability for nominal variables. Pearson's correlation coefficient was selected for interval and ratio variables. The results of the tests showed that intercoder reliability for the nominal variables ranged from .78 to .96; and for ratio variables ranged from .82 to .92. The content of the network coverage was coded by five coders after satisfactory intercoder reliability was established.

## **Results**

The networks' coverage during the first eight hours of September 11, 2001, appeared to have similar patterns in topics and key issues identified. Major topics that the news stories focused on were World Trade Center (28.92%), presidential and government activity (17.55%), terrorism and criminal activity (10.21%), Pentagon (7.52%), and air traffic and safety (5.91%) (Table 1). Key issues identified from the stories were: description of the incident (18.44%), severity of the disaster (18.26%), terrorism (15.49%), U.S. government reaction (13.52%) and safety concerns (12.98%). (Table 5A)

Hypothesis 1, that media rely more on government sources than other sources in a crisis situation, was supported. Two major sources were identified from the coverage: government officials and witnesses of the incident. Nearly 18% of the stories used government officials as sources, while 10.56% of the stories quoted witnesses (Table 3A). When government officials were used as sources, the stories addressed issues regarding government reaction and policies. Key issues associated with government

sources included terrorism, government reaction, rescue efforts and safety concerns.

When witnesses were quoted, the stories focused mostly on what happened at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Key issues associated with witnesses were recounting the incident and the severity of disaster.

Hypothesis 2, that media serve as a guiding and consoling source instead of just an information source in a crisis situation, was not supported. Over 76% of the stories were identified as presentation of facts, while 8.7% of stories were primarily analytical. Sixty-eight percent of the coverage time was devoted to presentation of facts, while 17% of coverage time was devoted to analysis. The coverage devoted to guiding the audience in a crisis situation (1.9%) and to consolation or easing stress and anxiety of audience (2.6%) was negligible. (Table 2)

Hypothesis 3, that media emphasize more human interest in crisis situations involving tragedy more than other political and economic factors, was not supported by the first eight hours coverage. About 4% of the stories were framed with a human interest approach. Political (21.75%) and criminal (12.35%) were two major frames of the coverage. More than half of the stories were framed as stories of disaster (43.96%) and safety concerns (9.49%). While these stories may be associated with the welfare of people, human interest was not found as a main frame of stories during the first eight hours coverage. (Table 4A)

Hypothesis 4, that coverage frames change during the different stages of crisis, was supported. During the first stage, from 8:45 am to 11:00 a.m., the coverage was mostly framed as stories of the disaster (56.82%). Other stories were framed as political (14.77), criminal and terrorism (12.53%) and safety concerns (8.95%). During the second



stage of the coverage, from 11:00 am to 3:00 p.m., the coverage framed as a disaster (37.26%) declined dramatically. Stories with political frames (28.77%) increased significantly from the first stage, while safety (10.85%) frames increased somewhat. Criminal and terrorism (11.79%) remained the same. After 3:00 p.m. stories framed as a disaster (31.51%) continued to decline, while stories framed with human interest (10.92%) increased significantly. Political frames (22.69%) remained high, and safety (7.14%) stayed at the same level as the previous two stages. Economy (2.52%) and environment (3.75%) became more evident. (Table 4B)

Hypothesis 5, that media coverage shift focus on key issues during the different stages of crisis, was supported. During the first stage, from 8:45 am to 11:00 a.m., the key issues identified were description of the incident (30.65), severity of disaster (17.90%), terrorism (15.66%), safety concerns (12.98%) and U.S. government reaction (10.07%). During the second stage of the coverage, from 11:00 am to 3:00 p.m., descriptions of incident declined dramatically (11.34%); severity of disaster (18.52%) and safety concerns (11.34%) remained the same. The issue of terrorism increased somewhat (17.13%), while U.S. government reaction (17.59%) and rescue effort (10.19%) increased significantly. After 3:00 p.m., description of disaster was no longer a dominant issue; however, severity of disaster (18.49%) remained high, and safety concerns (15.97%) increased. Victim of tragedy (5.88%) and economic impact (2.52%) also became more evident. (Table 5B)

The data analysis and findings also provide answers to the research questions regarding the relationship between source use and coverage frame, and the difference in coverage frames among the networks.

Q1: Are certain sources relied upon more in one frame than another?

The sources that were used most were government officials (17.91%), witnesses (10.56%), and experts (4.30%). The key coverage frames were clearly associated with certain sources. The political frame was associated most with government sources (36.21%). The stories framed as disaster used witnesses as the major source (20.37%), with government officials (10.39%) second. Criminal and terrorism frames used government officials (18.84%) and experts (17.39%) as the major sources. The sources cited in the stories framed as safety were government officials (16.98%) and airline officials (7.55%). Government officials were cited most in the stories framed as political, criminal, terrorism and safety. Experts were used in stories framed as criminal and terrorism, economy and religion; witnesses were cited most in stories framed as disaster and human interest. (Table 3B)

Q2: Is there a difference in coverage frame among the networks?

There was a difference in coverage frames among the networks. In addition, coverage frames varied across networks, but did not deviate too much. Four major coverage frames were identified. CBS and NBC had fewer stories framed as political than other networks. While three of the networks (ABC, CNN and FOX News) had a similar number of stories framed as criminal and terrorism, CBS (18.23%) had the most stories with the criminal frame, and NBC had the fewest. All networks devoted similar attention to the safety frame, except NBC (17.93%), which put more emphasis on it. While stories with the human interest frame did not gain much space from the networks, NBC (1.09%) had the fewest stories with the human interest frame (Table 4A).

## Discussion

The five network stations' news coverage 9/11 was basically in line with the findings of the previous studies and confirms the functions of television news during a crisis (Neal, 1980, and The National Research Council Committee, 1978). But the study also revealed evidence that media may behave differently in a crisis involving the national interest than what they are expected to.

Support of H1 reconfirmed the role of government officials in informing the public during a crisis. Government officials are one of the two major sources used in the coverage. However, the fact that 18% of the stories used government officials also suggests that during a crisis the capacity of government officials as sources is limited in certain aspects. Media need to rely on variety of sources to provide accurate and useful information. The findings are consistent with Naco's (1994) argument that media use different methods when covering an anti-American terrorist act than when covering other foreign policy issues. However, this study did not find that terrorists and their allies were used as sources, as Nacos found in her study. Taking into account the highly visible patriotism in the U.S. society after the incident, the findings indicate that the degree that a variety of sources will be used in the coverage, including those from the enemy, depends on the nature of the incident.

Media are supposed to provide guidelines for what to do (Graber 1980). The failure of finding support to H2 indicates there is a clear order in media priority during a crisis situation. The findings suggest that providing facts is the fundamental task of media in a crisis, especially during the first stages of the crisis, depending on the length and magnitude of the crisis. Although the public becomes almost totally dependent on the

media for news that may be vital for survival and for important messages from public and private authorities, media need to weigh the issues involved. The findings suggest that in a crisis of national magnitude, the need for guidance and consolation is likely to be overridden by the need for more accurate and informative facts.

When a tragedy involves human casualties, human interest is expected to be a central issue. The failure to find support for H3 indicates that human interest may give way to issues bearing more weight in the process of covering the crisis. The findings confirm Iyengar's notion that a relationship between media frames and audience frames is strongly contingent upon the issue under study (1987, 1989, 1991, 1993). The events of 9/11 had a clear political theme. What was the political stake involved, what actually happened and what was the severity of the disaster dominated the coverage of the first eight hours. The findings also suggest that the dominant frames of the coverage are associated with the dominant theme of the incident and how much political risk is involved.

Support of H4 is the most important finding of this study, which reveals how coverage frames changed during the different stages of a crisis. Stages of the crisis were found to be an important factor influencing coverage frames. During the first stage, stories framed as disaster dominated, and stories with political and criminal frames were evolving. Through three stages, the coverage frames evolved. As the coverage proceeded, the disaster frame declined, while the political and criminal frames increased. During the third stage, stories framed as human interest increased significantly; issues of concerning the environment and economy also surfaced. The findings confirm Graber's observation of three stages of crisis coverage by media. The results also add to the

finding of H3. Although the human interest frame was not found dominant in the coverage, it became evident during a later stage, when the focus of the coverage shifted and events brought attention to issues that may not be at stake during the earlier stages.

Support of H5 reconfirms the importance of stages in understanding media coverage of a crisis and is consistent with the notion advanced by previous studies that themes and issues change over time. Media quickly shift from presenting the terrifying effects to a strategy of “othering” (Ungar 1998). The findings of this study reveal when such shift took place in the coverage of a crisis of this magnitude and to what degree the changes took place from one stage to another. The findings also suggest that coverage of a remarkable crisis is a dynamic process involving evident changes of frames and key issues as the event unfolds. Media framing in the coverage of a crisis is a developing process with many facets.

The answers to the research questions are consistent with Lowery’s notion that issues and emphasis differ among media, but all forms of media include information on the principal issues (Lowery, 1988). However, the difference in coverage frames is not significant among the networks. The similar frames in networks’ coverage could be due to two reasons. During a national crisis, media tend to get accurate information and relieve uncertainty and calm people (Graber 1980) rather than sensationalize events and scoop each other. The second reason is the issues at stake. Political and criminal frames are the key frames associated with such an incident of national scope. No network could afford to deviate from others at such critical times in informing the public. The findings suggest that during a crisis of such magnitude, media coverage frames are less likely to be diverse, at least during the earlier stages of the coverage.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined how television networks covered a crisis involving national interest. It looked specifically at how different networks framed the content of television news coverage as events unfolded. Media performed their function basically as they were expected. But content analysis of network coverage of 9/11 incident also revealed how media behaved differently under a special crisis situation of national magnitude.

This study found that government officials were one of the major sources, but the magnitude of the crisis limited the capacity that government officials were used as sources. A variety of sources was used and the influence of government officials was not as great as in the coverage of a crisis with less involvement of U.S. national interest. Media primarily serve as the sources of accurate information instead of guidance and consolation during the crisis. Human interest was not found to be a dominant frame in the coverage even though the crisis involved human casualties. The human interest frame did not surface until the later stages of the coverage. Dominant frames were associated with the dominant theme of the incident. The stage of a crisis was an important factor in determining the coverage frames. The coverage frames changed over different stages as the unfolding event brought attention to new issues.

Further studies could look into a longer period of the coverage and the impact of other important variables on the coverage, such as reporter-source relationships, and how different reporting modes could affect coverage frames. Human interest is considered one of the major aspects of news value and a key frame of news coverage involving human activity. Further examination of the factors framing human interest and the relationship

between human interest and other frames in the coverage will provide more insight on how media behave in a crisis situation of national magnitude and involving national interest.

**Table 1**  
Percentage of topics in networks first 8 hours of coverage  
(N = 1117)

| <i>Topic</i>                    | Network |       |       |       |       | Total |
|---------------------------------|---------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
|                                 | ABC     | CBS   | NBC   | CNN   | FOX   |       |
| World Trade Center              | 23.10   | 27.60 | 34.24 | 31.03 | 31.55 | 28.92 |
| Pentagon                        | 5.94    | 3.65  | 7.61  | 10.34 | 10.19 | 7.52  |
| Air traffic                     | 8.25    | 4.17  | 6.52  | 5.17  | 4.37  | 5.91  |
| Safety                          | 3.63    | 3.13  | 5.98  | 0.43  | 0.97  | 2.78  |
| President and Government        | 17.82   | 15.63 | 9.24  | 18.97 | 24.76 | 17.55 |
| Business                        | 1.98    | 2.08  | 0.54  | 1.29  | 1.46  | 1.52  |
| Criminal activity and terrorism | 7.26    | 10.42 | 9.78  | 9.91  | 15.05 | 10.21 |
| Personal story                  | 0.99    | 5.21  | 0     | 4.31  | 0     | 2.06  |
| American public                 | 3.30    | 3.13  | 0     | 0.43  | 0     | 1.52  |
| U.S. Arab community             | 0.66    | 0     | 0     | 0     | 0     | 0.18  |
| International                   | 1.32    | 0.52  | 1.63  | 0.43  | 0.49  | 0.90  |
| Middle East                     | 4.29    | 2.60  | 3.26  | 3.02  | 0.49  | 2.86  |
| Enemy                           | 2.64    | 3.65  | 0.54  | 5.17  | 2.91  | 3.04  |
| Past events                     | 2.97    | 2.08  | 1.09  | 1.72  | 0     | 1.70  |
| Overview                        | 11.22   | 11.46 | 17.39 | 3.88  | 7.77  | 10.12 |
| Other                           | 4.62    | 4.69  | 2.17  | 3.88  | 0     | 3.22  |
| Total                           | 100     | 100   | 100   | 100   | 100   | 100   |

**Table 2**  
Percentage of Story Primary Orientation  
(N = 1117)

| Key Issues  | Network |       |       |       |       | Total |
|-------------|---------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
|             | ABC     | CBS   | NBC   | CNN   | FOX   |       |
| Analysis    | 19.14   | 16.15 | 16.85 | 15.52 | 25.73 | 18.71 |
| Consolation | 2.64    | 2.60  | 0.54  | 3.02  | 3.88  | 2.60  |
| Fact        | 77.56   | 79.69 | 82.07 | 77.16 | 65.37 | 76.34 |
| Guide       | 0.66    | 1.56  | 1.09  | 3.45  | 2.91  | 1.88  |
| Other       | 0.33    | 0.52  | 0     | 0     | 1.94  | 0.54  |
| Total       | 100     | 100   | 100   | 100   | 100   | 100   |



**Table 3A**  
Percentage of source used in networks first 8 hours of coverage  
(N = 1117)

| Source                  | Network |       |       |       |       | Total |
|-------------------------|---------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
|                         | ABC     | CBS   | NBC   | CNN   | FOX   |       |
| Airline Officials       | 1.98    | 0.52  | 4.35  | 1.29  | 1.46  | 1.88  |
| Arab Group              | 0.33    | 0     | 0     | 0     | 0.49  | 0.18  |
| Business                | 0.99    | 0.52  | 0.54  | 0     | 0     | 0.45  |
| Expert                  | 3.96    | 6.25  | 3.26  | 5.60  | 2.43  | 4.30  |
| Government Official     | 21.78   | 13.54 | 22.28 | 12.93 | 17.96 | 17.91 |
| International           | 1.32    | 1.56  | 3.26  | 1.72  | 0     | 1.52  |
| Non-Arab Group          | 0       | 0     | 0     | 0     | 0     | 0     |
| President               | 2.64    | 3.65  | 4.35  | 1.29  | 1.46  | 2.60  |
| Relative of victims     | 0       | 0     | 0     | 1.29  | 0     | 0.27  |
| Witness of the incident | 8.58    | 11.46 | 11.96 | 11.21 | 10.68 | 10.56 |
| Other                   | 3.63    | 1.56  | 3.80  | 1.29  | 0.97  | 2.33  |

**Table 3B**  
Percentage of Source Use Associated with Coverage Frame  
(N = 1117)

| Source        | Coverage Frame |        |         |         |        |        |        |          |       | Total |
|---------------|----------------|--------|---------|---------|--------|--------|--------|----------|-------|-------|
|               | Political      | Econ'y | Criminl | Environ | Safety | HumInt | Religi | Disaster | Other |       |
| Airline       | 0.82           | 0      | 1.45    | 0       | 7.55   | 0      | 0      | 1.43     | 3.23  | 1.88  |
| Arab Group    | 0.41           | 0      | 0.72    | 0       | 0      | 0      | 0      | 0        | 0     | 0.18  |
| Business      | 0              | 0      | 0       | 0       | 0      | 2.38   | 0      | 0.41     | 3.23  | 0.45  |
| Expert        | 3.70           | 11.11  | 17.39   | 0       | 2.83   | 0      | 20.00  | 1.83     | 0     | 4.30  |
| Gov official  | 36.21          | 0      | 18.84   | 25.00   | 16.98  | 4.76   | 0      | 10.39    | 19.35 | 17.91 |
| International | 4.12           | 0      | 2.90    | 0       | 0.94   | 2.38   | 0      | 0.20     | 0     | 1.52  |
| Non-Arab      | 0              | 0      | 0       | 0       | 0      | 0      | 0      | 0        | 0     | 0     |
| President     | 6.17           | 0      | 0.72    | 0       | 2.83   | 0      | 0      | 2.04     | 0     | 2.60  |
| Relative      | 0              | 0      | 0.72    | 0       | 0      | 4.76   | 0      | 0        | 0     | 0.27  |
| Witness       | 0.82           | 0      | 2.17    | 8.33    | 0.94   | 16.67  | 0      | 20.37    | 6.45  | 10.56 |
| Other         | 1.23           | 0      | 2.90    | 0       | 2.83   | 7.14   | 20.00  | 2.24     | 1.61  | 2.33  |

\* Percentages reflect how each source was used in the number of stories where the source was identified. Sources were not identified in some of the stories and thus total frequency does not add up to 100 percent.

**Table 4A**  
 Percentage of coverage frame in networks first 8 hours of coverage  
 (N = 1117)

| Key Issues     | Network |       |       |       |       | Total |
|----------------|---------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
|                | ABC     | CBS   | NBC   | CNN   | FOX   |       |
| Political      | 22.44   | 15.63 | 17.39 | 26.29 | 25.24 | 21.75 |
| Economy        | 1.32    | 2.60  | 1.09  | 1.29  | 1.94  | 1.61  |
| Criminal       | 13.53   | 18.23 | 5.43  | 11.64 | 12.14 | 12.35 |
| Environment    | 2.64    | 1.04  | 0     | 0     | 0.97  | 1.07  |
| Safety         | 8.25    | 10.42 | 17.93 | 6.03  | 6.80  | 9.49  |
| Human Interest | 4.95    | 3.13  | 1.09  | 4.31  | 4.37  | 3.76  |
| Religious      | 0.33    | 0     | 0.54  | 0.86  | 0.49  | 0.45  |
| Disaster       | 37.62   | 44.79 | 54.35 | 44.40 | 42.72 | 43.96 |
| Other          | 8.91    | 4.17  | 2.17  | 5.17  | 5.34  | 5.55  |
| Total          | 100     | 100   | 100   | 100   | 100   | 100   |

**Table 4B**  
 Percentage changes in coverage frame during different stages  
 In networks first 8 hours of coverage (N = 1117)

| Coverage Frame | Coverage Stage |          |       | Total |
|----------------|----------------|----------|-------|-------|
|                | 8-11am         | 11am-3pm | 3-5pm |       |
| Political      | 14.77          | 28.47    | 22.69 | 21.75 |
| Economy        | 0.89           | 1.85     | 2.52  | 1.61  |
| Criminal       | 12.53          | 11.57    | 13.45 | 12.35 |
| Environment    | 0.45           | 0.23     | 3.78  | 1.07  |
| Safety         | 8.95           | 11.34    | 7.14  | 9.49  |
| Human Interest | 1.34           | 2.31     | 10.92 | 3.76  |
| Religious      | 0.22           | 0        | 1.68  | 0.45  |
| Disaster       | 56.82          | 37.50    | 31.51 | 43.96 |
| Other          | 4.03           | 6.71     | 6.30  | 5.55  |
| Total          | 100            | 100      | 100   | 100   |

**Table 5A**  
 Percentage of key issues in networks first 8 hours of coverage  
 (N = 1117)

| Key Issues                 | Network |       |       |       |       | Total |
|----------------------------|---------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
|                            | ABC     | CBS   | NBC   | CNN   | FOX   |       |
| Description of incident    | 15.18   | 13.02 | 27.17 | 24.57 | 13.59 | 18.44 |
| Terrorism                  | 12.87   | 21.35 | 11.96 | 11.64 | 21.36 | 15.49 |
| U.S. Government reaction   | 13.86   | 7.81  | 11.41 | 15.09 | 18.45 | 13.52 |
| Severity of disaster       | 18.15   | 22.40 | 19.57 | 13.79 | 18.45 | 18.26 |
| Rescue effort              | 7.26    | 6.25  | 5.98  | 8.62  | 8.74  | 7.43  |
| Safety concerns            | 15.18   | 15.10 | 15.76 | 9.91  | 8.74  | 12.98 |
| Economic impact            | 0.66    | 2.60  | 1.09  | 1.29  | 1.94  | 1.43  |
| Victim of the tragedy      | 1.32    | 2.60  | 1.09  | 6.47  | 2.43  | 2.78  |
| Arab community in the U.S. | 0.33    | 0     | 0     | 0     | 0     | 0.09  |
| International reaction     | 0.99    | 0.52  | 1.09  | 2.16  | 0.49  | 1.07  |
| Muslim or Arab             | 4.95    | 0.52  | 4.35  | 1.72  | 1.46  | 2.78  |
| Other                      | 9.24    | 7.81  | 0.54  | 4.74  | 4.37  | 5.73  |
| Total                      | 100     | 100   | 100   | 100   | 100   | 100   |

**Table 5B**  
 Shift of focus in key issues during different stages  
 In networks first 8 hours of coverage (N = 1117)

| Key Issues                 | Coverage Stage |          |       | Total |
|----------------------------|----------------|----------|-------|-------|
|                            | 8-11am         | 11am-3pm | 3-5pm |       |
| Description of incident    | 30.65          | 11.34    | 8.40  | 18.44 |
| Terrorism                  | 15.66          | 17.13    | 12.18 | 15.49 |
| U.S. Government reaction   | 10.07          | 17.59    | 12.61 | 13.52 |
| Severity of disaster       | 17.90          | 18.52    | 18.49 | 18.26 |
| Rescue effort              | 5.15           | 10.19    | 6.72  | 7.43  |
| Safety concerns            | 12.98          | 11.34    | 15.97 | 12.98 |
| Economic impact            | 0.89           | 1.39     | 2.52  | 1.43  |
| Victim of the tragedy      | 1.57           | 2.31     | 5.88  | 2.78  |
| Arab community in the U.S. | 0              | 0        | 0.42  | 0.09  |
| International reaction     | 0.45           | 1.16     | 2.10  | 1.07  |
| Muslim or Arab             | 1.79           | 2.78     | 4.62  | 2.78  |
| Other                      | 2.91           | 6.25     | 10.08 | 5.73  |
| Total                      | 100            | 100      | 100   | 100   |

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<sup>1</sup> The actual content used for intercoder reliability test is about one hour of the news coverage from two network stations: CNN and ABC.