NO PREP

Media and 9/11

The Role of News in a National Crisis

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

Media and 9/11: The Role of News in a National Crisis

The Morning the Broadcast Never Ended

For most Americans, September 11, 2001 did not happen in New York or Washington — it happened on television. When American Airlines Flight 11 struck the North Tower at 8:46 a.m., networks broke into morning programming within minutes, cameras fixed on the burning skyscraper while anchors speculated about a terrible accident. Then, at 9:03, United Flight 175 curved into the South Tower on

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possessed was saturated at once — but television, with its live images, sat unchallenged at the center.

Speed Versus Accuracy: Reporting in the Fog

Live coverage of a fast-moving catastrophe carries a structural problem: the information arrives faster than it can be verified. Throughout the morning of September 11, false reports flashed across the networks — a car bomb at the State Department, a fire on the National Mall, additional hijacked planes still in the air. None were true, but each was repeated by credible anchors citing official-sounding sources, and each ratcheted national panic higher. Newsrooms faced a brutal choice with no good answer: hold information for verification and risk leaving the public uninformed during an ongoing attack, or air it with caveats and risk spreading fear that was false. The day also permanently changed the look of television news. To manage the flood of developments, networks introduced the continuously scrolling text 'crawl' at the bottom of the screen on September 11 itself — a feature so useful for conveying headlines during rolling coverage that it never went away. Journalism schools still teach that morning as the defining case study in crisis verification: the moment that proved speed and accuracy are competing values, and that the public pays the price when speed wins. The discipline that emerged has recognizable machinery. Serious newsrooms hardened their sourcing rules — a claim needs two independent, named-or-vouched sources before airing as fact; anything less airs as an attributed report or not at all. On-air corrections, once buried, became prompt and explicit, because the day taught that an uncorrected error compounds with every replay. And anchors learned to narrate uncertainty itself — 'here is what we know, here is what we cannot yet confirm' — a formula now standard in every breaking-news broadcast. Viewers can grade modern coverage against that standard: outlets that skip the labels are choosing speed over the lesson.

Framing a 'War': How Words Built Policy

The media did more than transmit events; it supplied the frame through which Americans understood them. Within hours, coverage shifted from the language of crime and disaster to the language of war — 'America Under Attack' read the banner graphics — and when President Bush spoke of a 'War on Terror,' the phrase moved instantly into headlines, chyrons, and everyday speech. Communication scholars call this framing: the selection of words and images that defines what kind of event something is, and therefore what responses seem reasonable. A 'crime' implies investigation and trials; a 'war' implies armies, sacrifice, and expanded government power. Political scientists documented a textbook 'rally round the flag' effect — presidential approval jumped to about 90 percent, the highest ever recorded — sustained partly by wall-to-wall coverage that emphasized national unity and threat. Media framing helped smooth the path for the invasion of Afghanistan, the Patriot Act, and the Department of Homeland Security, often with less adversarial questioning than would resurface in later years. The lesson for students is not that the framing was dishonest — it reflected genuine shock — but that frames have consequences: the words chosen in a crisis quietly define which policies feel necessary and which questions feel unpatriotic to ask.

The Ethics of Terrible Images

The most painful debates inside newsrooms concerned images. Footage of the planes striking the towers was replayed so relentlessly in the first days that networks eventually imposed restraint after psychologists warned that repetition served no informational purpose while re-traumatizing viewers — research later found that heavy television exposure in the weeks after 9/11 predicted stress symptoms even in people thousands of miles from the attacks, and pediatricians urged parents to shield young children, who sometimes believed each replay was a new attack. The single most contested image was the Associated Press photograph known as 'The Falling Man' — a person dropping headfirst from the North Tower,

composed with terrible grace. Many newspapers published it on September 12; reader outrage was immediate, and most never ran it again, effectively erasing from public view the hundreds who fell or jumped. Editors split on principle: some argued the photo violated the dignity of a dying man, others that hiding it sanitized the attack's true horror. There is no settled answer — which is precisely why the case endures in journalism ethics courses: every disaster since has forced editors to re-litigate the same question of what the public needs to see versus what it can bear to see. The norms that settled out are visible in retrospect. American networks largely stopped replaying the impact and collapse footage except in documentary context, and anniversary coverage evolved a restrained grammar — names read aloud, the memorial lights, survivors' voices — that remembers without re-wounding. News organizations built trauma awareness into their own operations too, after studies found elevated PTSD among photojournalists and editors who spent weeks immersed in the raw footage; several outlets now train staff and rotate them off graphic material. The underlying editorial test — does this image inform, or merely wound? — became a standing tool of the profession, applied now to war zones, shootings, and disasters far beyond 9/11.

From One Screen to a Billion: The Legacy

September 11 was the last great American crisis experienced through broadcast media alone — no smartphones, no social networks, no citizen video beyond a handful of camcorders. The whole nation watched a few professional feeds, guided by a few trusted anchors, and that architecture produced a unified (if imperfect) national narrative. Every crisis since has fragmented: today the first images come from bystanders' phones, rumors travel peer-to-peer faster than any newsroom can check them, and no shared anchor desk assembles a common story. Studying 9/11 coverage therefore teaches by contrast. The strengths of the old model — verification gates, editorial responsibility, shared experience — and its weaknesses — gatekeeper framing, deference to officials, slow correction — both stand out

clearly against the social media age. The skills the day demands of modern students are the ones journalists learned under fire that morning: distinguish confirmed fact from attributed claim, notice the frame a story arrives in, ask who benefits from a particular telling, and treat emotionally overwhelming images as information to be weighed, not just felt. In a century where everyone carries a broadcast station in a pocket, the editorial judgment once exercised in network control rooms now has to live in every citizen's head.

Key Information: Media and 9/11

Detail	Information
Second impact (9:03 a.m.)	Watched live by millions on network television
Commercial-free coverage	Roughly four straight days — longest in TV history
Peter Jennings	ABC anchor on air 60+ hours in the first week
News 'crawl'	Scrolling ticker debuted September 11 and never left
False reports that day	State Department car bomb; extra hijacked planes
'Rally round the flag'	Presidential approval hit ~90%, a record
'The Falling Man'	AP photo published Sept. 12, then widely withdrawn
TV exposure research	Heavy viewing predicted stress symptoms nationwide

Case Study: Rumor at the Anchor Desk

At 10:20 a.m. on September 11, anchor Mark Osei, 44, was live on a regional news network when a producer's voice came through his earpiece: a wire flash claimed a car bomb had exploded outside the State Department. Two competitor networks were already reporting it. His producer counted down from ten. Mark had one screen showing the burning towers and another showing the unverified flash — sourced to 'officials' no one on his staff had spoken to. "Every instinct said the country needed to know," he told a journalism class years later. "And one stubborn instinct said we didn't actually know it." On air, he chose a middle path: 'One wire service is reporting — and I want to stress this is unconfirmed by us — an incident at the State Department. We are working to verify.' Twenty minutes later the report collapsed; there had been no bomb. Mark's phrasing became a training clip: attribution, uncertainty labeled on air, and a promise to verify — the anatomy of honest reporting when the truth is not yet available.

1. What competing duties pulled at Mark, and how did his on-air wording resolve them?

_____

_____

2. Using this case, explain why false reports were so common on 9/11 even on responsible networks.

_____

_____

Multiple Choice

1. What television news feature debuted on September 11, 2001 and became permanent?
    a) The split-screen interview
    b) The scrolling news crawl
    c) The weather radar map
    d) The live phone-in segment

2. What did researchers find about heavy TV exposure to 9/11 coverage?
    a) It affected only New York residents
    b) It improved viewers' factual knowledge
    c) It predicted stress symptoms even far from the attacks
    d) It had no measurable psychological effect on any viewers

3. Why does framing an event as 'war' rather than 'crime' matter?
    a) It changes which government responses seem reasonable
    b) War stories typically earn significantly higher advertising rates
    c) Crime coverage is legally restricted
    d) The two words mean the same thing

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Framing	A) Naming the source of a claim rather than stating it as fact
2. ___ Rally round the flag	B) Scrolling on-screen ticker introduced during 9/11 coverage
3. ___ The Falling Man	C) Word and image choices that define what kind of event a story is
4. ___ News crawl	D) Contested AP photograph of a victim falling from the North Tower
5. ___ Attribution	E) Surge of public support for leaders during a national crisis

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The second plane struck at 9:03 a.m. on live _____.

2. Networks aired commercial-free coverage for about four _____.

3. Labeling a report's source on air is called _____.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Why did 9/11 create a permanent conflict between speed and accuracy in news, and how do newsrooms manage it?

_____

_____

_____

2. Make the strongest argument for and against publishing 'The Falling Man' photograph.

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3. How does experiencing a crisis through social media differ from the shared broadcast experience of 9/11?

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