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### Television Impact: More Than Words Alone\*

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While one can argue forever about the concept of journalistic objectivity, some news stories are so packed with emotion that it is extremely difficult for reporters and editors to remain strictly neutral. Such was the case with 9/11 (and a few years later, in fact, with hurricanes Katrina and Rita). While journalists are taught detachment, it may not always be possible and, arguably perhaps, sharing the emotion being felt by the public may even strengthen the impact of news coverage.

This is particularly true of television journalism, often done at the time and at the scene where the emotional impact is greatest. Broadcast journalists most frequently try to carefully structure what they say. But words alone cannot possibly characterize television, the ultimate visual medium. Unlike print, viewers experience time and space with the journalists on the screen. And, for that reason, facial gestures and body language convey messages that can reinforce the intent of the spoken word—or they can negate the spoken message entirely.

Such nonverbal communication of broadcasters is particularly important because of the effects it can have on viewers. Journalists' projections of anger, fear or stress may induce the same emotions in viewers,<sup>1</sup> and public perceptions of bias in reporting—even if in facial expression—may directly impact the believability of that reporting, in short, may impact media credibility.<sup>2</sup>

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Television was Americans' main source of information on September 11, 2001.<sup>3</sup> Viewers watched an average of eight hours of television a day on 9/11, with 18 percent viewing upwards of 13 hours that day, and scholars have found a link between increased viewing and increased stress.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, this study has import for broadcasters seeking to be seen as credible news conveyors, and 9/11 is not the only circumstance in which this knowledge is useful. Terrorist acts are becoming more frequent, as can be seen in the cases of Oklahoma City, Waco, the Madrid train bombings and the Russian school massacre.

Broadcasters also may be overcome with emotion while covering news such as school shootings, hostage standoffs, hurricanes, tornadoes, high-speed chases, out-of-control fires, and even trials that feature graphic images. Emotional testimony from victims' relatives can move reporters to emotional displays. The lessons learned from 9/11, as extreme as it was, may indeed be generalized to numerous other circumstances in which reporters find themselves, from wars to gruesome car accidents.

### Nonverbal Communication Has Impact

The nonverbal component of communication is at least as important as the verbal content.<sup>5</sup> When verbal and nonverbal messages are contradictory, receivers typically believe the nonverbal message.<sup>6</sup> On television, especially, "expressions usually dominate words."<sup>7</sup> Verbal communication is more persuasive when factual arguments are presented, but nonverbal communication is more relevant to impression formation and emotional expression.<sup>8</sup> After all, effective communication involves both content and affect.<sup>9</sup>

While expressions may be masked with facial management techniques,<sup>10</sup> or overridden by suppressing or counterfeiting them,<sup>11</sup> few journalists are trained in these techniques.

The fact that broadcast journalists *are* instructed to be objective in their display of emotion, attitudes, and bias gives credence to how they present the information as well as what information they present.

This study does not intend to criticize journalists who covered the September 11, 2001, attacks, often at great personal risk. They did an exceptional job under unprecedented pressures. But journalists are human, and nonverbal displays may be difficult to control, even for trained professionals.

And, make no mistake about it: The journalists who covered 9/11 shared in the nation's intense emotion of the day. Those interviewed all

admitted feeling the same emotions that viewers felt—fear, concern, anger. But they also said the pressure of covering the event kept them so busy that they could not focus on their feelings.

“We didn’t get to experience what the rest of America got to experience, to just sit and watch this unfold and to experience our feelings and to remember our feelings. We’re working the story,” said Lester Holt, an anchor for MSNBC. “You are always one step ahead, and you can’t absorb the enormity of what’s happening on a human level. You know, I didn’t have a chance to shed a tear like so many people did, to feel the grief and the shock and all of that because you just can’t—there is not time.”

The coverage of 9/11 was much more difficult for the New York-based networks than most national disaster stories. This was happening to them, in their city, to their friends and neighbors, to their country.

“Other breaking news stories—the Columbine School shooting, the Oklahoma City bombing or a plane crash or you name it, breaking news—didn’t seem to affect us personally the way this did,” said Marcy McGinnis, senior vice president for news coverage at CBS. “It was all sort of impersonal. But this story was very personal. . . . It happened in our city, so therefore it was something that affected you personally, but there was a point at which—and I say it was the point at which the Pentagon got hit—that it affected us as human beings, as American citizens as well as journalists.”

Despite the pressures of the job and the broadcast canon to stay cool under fire, emotional outbreaks did occur in the newsrooms.

Sharri Berg, vice president of FOX News, said several people broke down under the emotion of the day. “(One of her news managers) was just looking up at the monitors, and tears filled his eyes, and he just kind of broke down and for a moment. I wanted to say ‘what’s wrong? You are in your mode, your walls are up, you are covering a story.’”

“That was happening throughout the day with different people, and it was hitting people at different times,” she said.

The journalists also had to deal with their personal concerns for family members and friends.

“I was very concerned about people I knew. I knew that my brother-in-law was in the building next door, the American Express building. I knew that other people that I know might be down there and could have been hurt. And I was aware of that, but I just sort of pushed that to the back of my head,” said Al Ortiz, executive producer and director, special events, at CBS.

MSNBC's Holt agreed.

"Everybody who was covering the story that day has a personal connection," he said. "Other people lost friends, other people, it was their neighborhood. It was very real. We are used to covering things—bombing in Afghanistan, earthquakes in California—it is never, it isn't necessarily, someone you know. But you know this one shattered everybody's collective sense of security."

### Nonverbal Expressions in the News

The presence of such an emotional atmosphere and the importance of how journalists deal with that emotion, therefore, prompted this study of news coverage of 9/11 from a nonverbal standpoint: Analysis was conducted of four networks (ABC, CBS, NBC and CNN) to look at whether broadcasters showed significant positive or negative nonverbal behavior.

The question? How successful were professionally trained broadcasters in controlling their nonverbal communication during the most traumatic and emotional event in recent memory? And, since previous research has documented that women convey emotion better than men,<sup>12</sup> and since at least 33 percent of broadcast journalists are female,<sup>13</sup> this study also explored whether female broadcasters would exhibit more nonverbal expressions than males. Also of interest was whether emotion varied according to the time of the day, i.e., whether journalists were more likely to show emotion early or later in the coverage of 9/11, and whether networks differed in broadcasters' total nonverbal expressions:

This study included 2,067 shots taken in the first twenty-four hours of newscasts about 9/11. CNN contributed about 30 percent of the total, ABC 26 percent, CBS 22 percent, and NBC 22 percent. As a result, the nonverbal expressions of 653 journalists were coded. The study measured six nonverbal dimensions that had been tested in previous studies: eyebrows, mouth and lips, head, overall face, overall body, and overall gesturing.<sup>14</sup> Of all the nonverbal cues, facial expressions carry the most information.<sup>15</sup> They are rich sources of direct and inferred information because they readily reveal mental states.<sup>16</sup>

Such was the focus of this study, and it confirmed the expectation that broadcasters would communicate significantly more nonverbal expressions (positive and negative combined) than neutral expressions during the first twenty-four hours of 9/11. Of the 653 journalists, 600 exhibited at least one non-neutral nonverbal expression during the first twenty-four hours.

### A Gender Effect?

On the other hand, the study did not determine that female broadcasters would exhibit significantly more total nonverbal expressions than male broadcasters. Contrary to predictions of prior research, no significant difference between male and female broadcasters during the coverage of 9/11 was indicated.

While broadcasters overall may not have been entirely successful in concealing their nonverbal expressions, men and women had about the same rate of success (or failure) in this regard. This finding should help put to rest any lingering concerns over women being able to report as well as men on certain stories.

It is not possible to say from this correlational study whether women broadcasters learn to conceal their emotions or whether women who go into broadcasting already have this trait.<sup>17</sup> But it is encouraging that, for once, no gender difference was found when other indications say it should be there.

### Time of Day

Significant differences were found, however, in emotion shown at different times of that terrible day. The highest average of nonverbal expressions came in the second eight-hour period, from 5 p.m. Sept. 11 to 1 a.m. the next day. The lowest average occurred in the final eight-hour segment, from 1 a.m. to 9 a.m. on Sept. 12. On the negative side, reporters made the most negative nonverbal expressions during the first period (46 percent), immediately followed by the second period (44 percent).

That the second eight hours produced the highest averages for emotion is surprising at first glance; one might intuitively expect the early hours of the event to produce more emotion.

However, only after the event had unfolded and no more incidents occurred did journalists begin to contemplate the implications of such a massive, planned undertaking. In this second period, they lost their professional neutrality and were more likely to visually express emotions. And, as described in Chapter 2, coverage by CNN during this stage consisted partly of a press conference and a "Larry King Live" talk show in which people were asked to describe how they helped one another.

### Differences among Networks

Significant differences did exist among networks, and this agrees with other research on bias in political coverage.<sup>18</sup>

Of the four networks examined (CNN, ABC, NBC, and CBS), CNN had the fewest nonverbal expressions, while NBC yielded the highest average, and the difference was significant. Furthermore, significant differences occurred among the networks in the valence of broadcasters' nonverbal expressions. ABC and NBC, for example, were statistically different in the degree of nonverbal expressions. NBC's coverage was the most negative, followed by CBS, CNN, and ABC.

Given the enormity of the tragedy, it may not be too surprising that journalists' underlying attitudes and emotions were revealed nonverbally, or that the nonverbal information they conveyed was overwhelmingly negative. Yet, broadcast journalists would be surprised at this finding. They believe they are more successful at adhering to the journalistic tenet of impartiality. This was not upheld – at least not in nonverbal communication.

### **Nonverbal Communications and Objectivity**

This study aimed to extend the findings on broadcasters' nonverbal communication from one arena—political coverage—to another, that of breaking news. That broadcasters do exhibit nonverbal behavior in at least two different settings makes it less likely that the content of the story is the only explanation. That seasoned network anchors and reporters were so frequently unable to convey neutral nonverbal expressions is worth noting.

These findings may give ammunition to critics of journalism who say journalists are not objective—at least not in the nonverbal content of their messages. In this content analysis, the nonverbal behaviors of broadcasters covering the first twenty-four hours of 9/11 more often conveyed positive or negative expressions than neutral expressions. The goal of objectivity in news coverage is deeply entrenched in journalistic culture, but research makes it clear that journalists routinely do not achieve that goal, at least nonverbally and with such a tragic occurrence. This is particularly the case given current television emphases on talk shows that feature opinions.

This would indicate that training in facial management techniques may be appropriate for broadcasters. Journalists need to develop emotionally neutral ways of interpreting the events with which they deal.<sup>19</sup> It is especially important to journalists in the second stage of crisis because an important element of this stage is that the media try to ease tensions among the audience and increase national morale. If their nonverbal behavior does not convey this message, it is unlikely their words will have the intended effect.

On the other hand, it may not be so clear because in this context, it may be the case that such opinions even facilitate the easing of tensions. In fact, some of the journalists interviewed said the showing of emotion on 9/11 did not detract from the coverage; rather, they saw it as needed and a positive force of their reaching out to their publics.

"There is a time that I think it is OK to be human," MSNBC's Holt said. "This was a story that didn't have two sides to it. You didn't have to worry about being impartial. So it was OK to be factual, but at the same time it was OK to show some emotion. I think sometimes we get out of journalism school, we are like 'I am a journalist and I am not affected by anything.' Well, you know what, you are also a human being, and you were affected."

So, the debate continues. But beyond the implications for whether objectivity is an impossible goal for journalism—or whether, indeed, it is only circumstantially desirable, the results of this study do raise questions about what effects these biased nonverbal expressions of broadcasters have on viewers.

It's important that journalists understand the potential impact of their nonverbal behavior and whether their choices are conscious or unconscious. No matter how well hidden, journalists' nonverbal behavior can stir viewers' emotions, influence the opinions they form and even affect their attitudes and behavior. Any journalistic technique loses its impact when overdone or when done without understanding of what it means. Inevitably, this will have an effect on credibility.

### Notes

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