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The Influence of USA TV News on American's Mental Health: Two Years After the Terrorist Attack on the World Trade Center

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1. Introduction

People's lives are based on symbols from different ages. The environment provides us with symbols, which create our reality. It makes us learn how everything works and often shows us respected values. Symbols let us share information with other people and communicate. They are the main ingredients of the messages that we spread to others. Thanks to them, we create a relationship with a receiver. One of the oldest known systems that offer us symbols is religion; e.g., mythology. Thanks to these symbols, people were able to spread messages between each other even before they were able to read and write. Later, great artists took inspiration from symbols to create a rich cultural heritage. However, there is still space for individual interpretation. It does not disturb the sense of the message.

Today, the world of symbols is managed by another structure than religion. This structure is television as a mass medium. The public is under constant attack by the incoming news from television, especially TV news. It creates a new reality and forces us to understand the world in a particular way. The content that is broadcast via television can only be interpreted in its literal sense, leaving no room for individual interpretation. Moreover, Television makes all people recipients of the same message. "Television as a medium of the socialization of most people into standardized roles and behaviors. Its function is, in word, enculturation" (Gebner, 1976).

Television has an incredible impact on our lives. It has created a concept of reality through images and information that impacts society on a daily basis. Today people live in a world where facts intertwine with opinion. In the case of TV news, it can be the opinion of a reporter or a policy of the TV station. Television and TV news has created a desire in people to receive shocking information. Often, this information is drastic and full of violence. People are unaware that it has a negative impact on their mental health.

Against this backdrop, the main goal of this essay is to explain how the media influenced the public's mental health by constant reporting of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on the 11th of September 2001. The text shows how the media works, particularly news TV, and the specific aspects which receive the most attention during a broadcast of a tragedy like the terrorist attack on 9/11. Finally, the paper sums up which factors the most influenced Americans' mental health after the attack on the Twin Towers.

2. Why TV and its content gained popularity

Television gained popularity thanks to its simplicity. TV offers a lot for a small price, starting with the fact that one can receive even if unable to read and write. TV offers more than the radio does: we do not only listen to content but also view images. It does not require any effort on the part of the viewer. Moreover, the television does not require any mobility from us, unlike the theatre. All we need to do is turn on the TV.

The average American family accepts television as the indispensable element of family life (Gerbner et al., 1980). Unfortunately, not only adults follow the lifestyles depicted on TV but also children. It is very easy to capture a child's attention using vivid and loud television. This way, unaware parents accustom their children to watching TV and very often get addicted to it. In the future, children will not be able to easily escape from watching television because they will have been watching TV programs all their lives.

3. TV news and its role

The primary role of modern TV news is to spread information around the whole globe. It satisfies our desire for knowledge and information. Thanks to TV, we can know what is happening in the farthest corners of the world. That is one of the reasons why media is so important to society (Nacos, Bloch-Elkon and Shapiro, 2007). Today, many consider that media, particularly TV news, is the most influential tool for the effective impact on our perception of the world compared to all other TV programming. The news is able to control the whole world because of its popularity and availability. It has the same impact on ordinary people as it does on other, more influential groups of people (Hardaway, 2004) We should be aware of the fact that, by watching TV, we deprive ourselves of our own interpretation of the facts. The television offers a clear, concrete message. There is no hidden sense and everything is evaluated.

As in the past, the media affects us deeply, only the medium has changed; before, it was the newspapers, now it is television. Even if we witness some sort of event or accident, the first thing we do after we enter the house is turn on the news to learn about the genesis of the situation and the motives of the people involved. Frequently, the media interpretation of events is dictated by news organizations (Nacos, Bloch-Elkon and Shapiro, 2007). It is important to emphasize that TV news, despite its role in spreading information, is strictly commercial-oriented. Their main goal is, and always will be, to earn money. It is generally known that TV stations care about the number of viewers. Their key to success is giving

society as many breaking news stories as possible. Breaking news is important: it is the newest information that causes a break in the program. According to sources such as “Post-9/11 Terrorism Threats, News Coverage, and Public Perceptions in the United States” that bases on Bok S. Myhem’s *Violence as Public Entertainment* (1998) and Shanahan and Morgan’s *Television and Its viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research* (1999) – people want to hear unexpected, shocking, and surprising news that get their attention instantly. We can prove this by how TV news reported facts connected with the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center months after the tragedy. The news focused only on the aspects related to the crisis. A survey conducted during a report of the events by a breakfast TV show revealed an interesting observation. When an alert appeared about a potential terrorist threat after the attack, a news report covered it in 734 words; however, when the alert the Department of Homeland Security lowered the alert, twenty-five words sufficed (Nacos, Bloch-Elkon and Shapiro, 2007). This unfortunate phenomenon makes TV stations that broadcast crime, disaster, and human suffering popular. It is obvious that, today, people do not care about ordinary information. They crave information that amazes and surprises them. They do not realize that such news can have a harmful effect on their health or mood. Stressful information can be the reason for undesirable diseases.

4. The media and information delivery

The World Trade Center terrorist attack on the 11th of September, 2001, was the most terrible act of terrorism that has occurred in recent decades. The manner in which news frame such event is of utmost importance. Images, reporter’s tone and even their outfit can play a huge role in shaping the public’s opinion. As an example of the reports of the attack let us take the speech of the former Secretary of State, James Baker, given on the 11th of September, 2001, at 5:04 P.M. The media showed the audio of his speech alongside pictures of the World Trade Center.

Baker’s message was: “It’s a terribly tragic event in my view and it moves us into probably another era, one that we have feared for some time would get us here, as far as our vulnerability to terrorism is concerned. Some of the things that we are going to have to do is to beef up particularly our human intelligence capability so that we’re able to penetrate these groups. We’ve let those slide ever since the mid-seventies. Somehow it has always been a little offensive to us to do the kind of things you have to do to be a clandestine spy and penetrate those groups. We’re going to have to get back into that messy business, we’re going to have to beef up our security measures” (Anker, 2005). This melodramatic

audiovisual presentation lasted for a minute and was constantly repeated, even seven times in one hour (Anker, 2005). Moreover, even the color of the subtitles, which is presented in the TV news is also relevant. When the words “TERRORIST ATTACK” appear in red over a background in natural color, black or white, our subconsciousness chooses which words are important, and which are stronger and more powerful. It is not surprising that red is the color of aggression and was never associated with peace. When we are switching channels and suddenly see the evening news with a title in big font in an aggressive color, it makes us immediately focus, even without reading the content. During the early 2000s, the attack on the World Trade Center was the most covered story in the media. In a few seconds, the message about the tragedy spread not only to New Yorkers but around the entire world. During that time, information began to spread throughout world society. TV presenters wanted to show this “breaking news” to the world and everybody wanted to be first in giving us the most “relevant” information. They gave everything they had in order to detect, record, and discuss it. Sometimes, these discussions were inappropriate. People could see reporters with masks on their faces standing among the ruins of the attack. The World Trade Center area was full of dust, blood, and injured people. The most tragic facts have been reported on live air. People could see others dying in the debris and those faced with the choice of dying in the flames or quickly jumping from the window many meters above the ground. For these people, their lives finished the moment they have decided which way to go. TV news in the whole of the United States showed how people fell down from the highest parts of the Twin Towers repeatedly. It was the best way to spread the fear of terrorism among society. People realized the tragedy of large-scale terrorism. Moreover, TV news increased the popularity of those terrorists. This is what terrorist groups like al-Qaeda wanted: popularity and influence. Their purpose is to spread fear in society, to defeat everyone that opposes them. TV news is a very useful tool to achieve that.

5. The consequences of prolonged tv news exposure

Terrorists want to spread panic and media helps them with that mission. We might be afraid that by talking about terrorist groups we help cause new terrorist attacks. On the other hand, thanks to the media we get information. We can be prepared for the next similar situation and prevent the muddle and panic. In addition, we can do more to prevent attacks. The survey conducted between 13–14.09.2001 among a random sample of 959 Americans interviewed by telephone shows that 85% of people from all the states of America want to

support military organizations which actively oppose terrorist groups. Soon after the study, in 2002, the USA Congress proclaimed that the States is willing to use military forces against, for example, al-Qaeda.¹ This response means that TV news contributed to US foreign policy and we may well have less terrorist attacks in the future. On the other hand, the exposure to these dramatic scenes has negative effects for public mental health. Viewing violent scenes has an impact on the mental health of viewers. Most people did not see such images in movies, and then they were forced to watch this in reality. The sight of blood on injured people who escaped from the burning building and emergency services working at their limits made the society suffer.

Gerbner's theory of cultivation shows how watching TV affects people's behavior. We know that the commercialism of TV is the reason why it is full of violence. We can find TV news in this scheme as well. George Gerbner states that, because of that, people who watch TV can become afraid of the world. The violence presented on TV can be the reason why we stop trusting people around us – and we feel insecure (Griffin, 2003, p. 381–390). All the family members have almost unlimited access to TV.

According to Gerbner, violence is the cheapest way of getting people's attention by showing them the "rules of this world." Gerbner created his own definition of violence for the purpose of carrying out his research which is: "violence is the overt expression of physical force (with or without a weapon, against self or others) compelling action against ones will on pain of being hurt and/or killed or threatened to be so victimized as part of the plot. Idle threats, verbal abuse, or gestures without credible violent consequences are not coded as violence. However, 'accidental' and 'natural' violence (always purposeful dramatic actions that do victimize certain characters) are, of course included" (Gerbner et al., 1980). This definition included events like accidents and natural disasters. The consequences of constant TV watching are the most visible after time passes, when a person changes their behavior. Gerbner divided TV consumers into three groups. The first group consists of those who watch TV four or more hours per day (25% of population). He calls this group heavy viewers. Those who watch TV between two and four hours per day (50% of population) are medium viewers, and those who watch TV up to two hours per day – light viewers (25% of population). Gebner focuses his attention on the two extremes. To prove that people who watch TV are more likely to feel insecure, Gerbner conducted a survey. During the survey, he asked people how high is the probability that they will be involved

¹ CBS News.com, Poll: Revenge and Return (Sept.15, 2001) available at <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/poll-revenge-and-return/>

in an act of violence or crime sometime next week. Heavy viewers declared that they think that the chance for this would be 1:10, while the light viewers answered that the probability is 1:100. Both groups were wrong. The statistics show that the real probability is 1:10 000. It shows how people exaggerate the scale of the threat. Being constantly exposed to TV's crimes and violence, heavy viewers are sure that around 5% of the society is involved in defending the law and policemen use firearms every day, which is clearly inaccurate. According to Gerbner, there are two ways to explain why people act this way.

One of them is called "mainstream." Mainstreaming touches viewers who constantly watch TV and, because of that, they build the same outlook of the surrounding world through exposure to the same images and statements on TV (Gerbner et al., 1980). Because the TV tries to attract as many people as possible, it sets the mainstream by normalizing a program that will appeal to the widest group of people. Television therefore creates common opinion among the public (Griffin, 2003, p. 381–390). The audience is less critical than they should be and follow the opinion of others (Mrozowski, 2000, p. 389–392). Gerbner shows that, because of this, we have to deal with the blurring of social differences in politics and economics. TV glorifies the middle class and all viewers subconsciously identify with it.

The second reason for people's miscalculations is called "resonance." It states that witnesses of violence feel unpleasant flashback every time they see similar images on TV. They nevertheless tend to form a relationship between real life and TV images.

6. General fear

People watching TV news during and immediately after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center experienced more stress, anxiety, and even mental health problems than those who did not watch the events (Nacos, Bloch-Elkon and Shapiro, 2007). People constantly exposed to any TV news about terrorism, terrorist attacks, and the 9/11 tragedy became more susceptible to mental illnesses. The American society has been deeply affected by the news regarding the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center. One of the first surveys, conducted via telephone during the following week after the attack, shows that 44% of Americans showed symptoms of substantial stress and more than 90% were showing at least one symptom of such stress (Schauster, 2001). American TV news spread general panic in the USA. People under the influence of such a large amount of information, data, and reports from the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center became more and more horrified. During the first few weeks

after the tragedy, some people began conducting research on the state of anxiety of the Americans. In the aftermath of the terrorist attack, 88% of the American society stated that the next potential terrorist attack on America is “very likely” or “somewhat likely” in the coming months (Nacos, Bloch-Elkon and Shapiro, 2007). These figures show how much America was intimidated by terrorists and the extent that television news has sparked this fear in society. TV news had made society convinced that they will see another terrorist attack and hence a tragedy. Furthermore, in the following days after September 11, four out of ten Americans were sure that they are in danger and it is very likely that the next potential act of terrorism could happen nearby. In the weeks following the WTC attack, more than half of all Americans thought that they and their families were at risk of the next terrorist attacks (Nacos, Bloch-Elkon and Shapiro, 2007). Terrorists achieved their heinous goal. America was steeped in panic and, what is more, American TV news played a huge role in this terrible situation (Ahern et al., 2004). The attack of al-Qaeda was a popular topic not only in the USA but in the whole world.

The whole globe is now aware of the power of terrorism. The research that we can find in “Post-9/11 Terrorism Threats, News Coverage, and Public Perceptions in the United States” shows that the media has the most influence on our sense of security. Over several years, we see that any information about al-Qaeda or the probability of the next terrorist attacks increases the sense of fear in society. Stress is very unhealthy and causes many illnesses, including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD). People panicked due to the large amount of news stories about a real threat to their lives. Facing this tragedy, people developed other forms of interpretation about the genesis of this act. This was so because people never faced such events before. People were too scared to verify the information. Moreover, they wanted to know more all the time. That is why they were watching TV constantly, which resulted in mental illness.

The pattern of human behavior in the face threat to life has been long known. An excellent example is the American incident of October 30, 1938. On the eve of Halloween, a group of actors in a New York Studio decided to broadcast a story about an invasion from Mars. The broadcast was extremely realistic. One out of 6 million recipients believed that the news was authentic (Cantril, 1940). American society felt threatened due to broadcasted news coverage which was actually a Halloween story. This situation allowed human behavior to be precisely observed in the face of panic. The survey was conducted on a group of 135 people, where 100 people testified to be scared because of the situation. Americans remained panicked even when the broadcast was stopped, and a significant amount of time had passed.

Americans were praying and crying in the aftermath of the "Invasion from Mars." Some of them were calling their families, some were trying to warn their neighbors, and some were driving at high speed, trying to run away from death. Broadcast and TV carried on giving a description of human behavior many weeks later. Where does panic come from? Many people stopped reading the newspaper and decided to listen to the radio instead. They were sure that the radio transmits important authentic information: "We have so much faith in broadcasting. In a crisis it has to reach all the people. That's what radio is here for," said one of the interviewees (Cantril, 1940). Most of the people who believed that the story was authentic were less educated and had a lower income.

People believed this story because it was unusual, and they did not have any prior experience with similar stories. They had to rely on an "expert" opinion. The expert was presented as a very important person who knows the topic very well. He was called an astronomer. He was putatively talking with many professors from different countries. Additionally, to make the transmission more realistic, the authors presented an opinion of a person that was referred to as the US Secretary of State. It made the message sound very reliable to the broader public. What is more, the actors were very convincing. One of them was noted saying "This is the most terrifying thing I have ever witnessed (...) This is the most extraordinary experience. There are no words." The actor pretended that he was witnessing the situation and allowed people to imagine how incredible it was (Cantril, 1940).

There are four ways in which the broadcast was received. The first one is a group of people who do not believe in broadcast. For them, the message sounds like a piece from a fantasy book: "At first I was very interested in the fall of the meteor. It isn't often that they find a big one just when it falls. But when it started to unscrew and monsters came out, I said to myself 'They've taken one of those *Amazing Stories* and are acting out. It just couldn't be real. It was just like some of the stories that I read in *Amazing Stories* but it was even more exciting" (Cantril, 1940). The second group of people decided to verify the information by listening to the radio. They checked in the newspaper what kind of program is being broadcasted and they realized that it was not for real. The third group of people tried to verify the information with the program list in the newspaper, however they still believed in the broadcast. The last group did not check the program list at all. They were sure that the broadcast is authentic. One of the reasons why they did not feel the need to verify the information was the scale of their fear. They stated that they were more concerned about their lives than about checking if the information is reliable. The same occurred in the case of the World Trade Center terrorist attack. Another reaction was indifference to death, some people

decided that the tragedy did not matter since the incident had already happened and there was nothing they could do about it.

Why were some of the viewers able to look critically at the story? It depends on our ability to process the stimuli and classify them as essential or irrelevant. Some people were sure that it was the end of the world according to their religious belief. People who believed in *God* used their belief to analyze the situation. This group of people was focused only on that fact and they treated the rest as irrelevant, also the possible verification of the broadcasted news with the program in the newspaper. The other group of people who decided to check the program in the newspaper were unsure whether they were able to make a reliable evaluation. They decided to help themselves by verifying information at the beginning. Another example of how broadcasted news could be verified would be carefully listening. One of the listeners found a mistake in the speech of the announcer. When we have to deal with information, which we are not able to verify with the knowledge that we possess, as we never had the chance to encounter such a problem before, we often rely on the opinion of others. However, it is good to listen them carefully. Probably, in their speech there will be a part dedicated to the subject that you have knowledge about. If this part does not correspond with the truth, the probability that the rest is authentic diminishes. The next method of understanding information concerns people that are not able to match the story to any of their standards of judgment. This group of people is unable to create their own interpretation and usually follows the first interpretation available. The last way of understanding is the absence of reflection that the information may be potentially untrue (Cantril, 1940).

The panic in society was spread by a group of people convinced that not only were their lives endangered but also their financial and physical position. The same happened in the case of the World Trade Center terrorist attack.

7. Post-traumatic stress disorder

In the first few weeks after the World Trade Center attacks, the first symptoms of mental illness occurred. The symptoms were stress, re-occurrence of symptoms of previous psychiatric disorders present, and appearance of new psychiatric disorders, called post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which was resulted from the tragedy (Randall, Marshall and Galea, 2004). Post-traumatic stress disorder is an ailment that affects people who witness a tragedy, cataclysm, or personal trauma. This disorder can develop any day, making the patient suffer more. After September 11, PTSD symptoms usually occurred, however not always, during the first three months. It is not easy to identify this ailment, since

its symptoms are similar to those of stress, anxiety, and depression. People with PTSD may have disturbing nightmares and flashbacks of the tragedy. Furthermore, it is possible to feel isolated from others, depressed, incapable of experiencing pleasure, and sometimes having suicidal thoughts (Randall, Marshall and Galea, 2004). This is a disease no one would like to suffer. Somebody who survives tragedy must struggle with this illness every day. There is no moment of rest and, even at night, the nightmares prevent it (Propper, 2007, s. 334–340). The images from the attacks can be seen almost constantly. Sometimes those dreams turn into nightmares. It is not surprising that patients cannot cope with the disease and begin to think about suicide. Scholars estimate that the number of people who died in the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center was around 3,000. In fact, there are many more victims. Many Americans have witnessed this tragedy. Although not every American saw it first hand, losing a friend or family member or seeing it on the news along with the horrible images was enough to feel the pain connected with this tragedy.

8. The spread of mental illnesses across the USA

The USA is a country that has the largest number of psychotherapists in the world. After the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, this number increased. Mental health problems reveal themselves through symptoms such as stress, fear of loss of shelter or work, PTSD, and other. There are studies that show a correlation between watching TV programs about terrorist attacks and symptoms of PTSD. The research began immediately after the tragedy. TV news showed so many horrific reports from the place of the tragedy that people were already affected by symptoms of mental illness five days after the attack. Researchers used phone calls to ask people about any symptoms of PTSD. The call considered adults who lived in the United States during the attack on the World Trade Center. Researchers were looking for five different kinds of PTSD symptoms among participants of the survey. Those symptoms were the feeling of upset, flashbacks of images from the event, difficulties with concentration, insomnia, and irritation. The survey showed that 44% of the interviewees declared having at least one of the symptoms (Randall, Marshall and Galea, 2004). Later, the research focused on children and their symptoms. 11% of 1.1 million examined children had symptoms of PTSD. Moreover, 10% of children said that they were afraid of being in public places. Many children had personal problems related to the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. Their most common problem was recurrent thoughts about the attack. 76% of the interviewed children reported this symptom. Additionally, more than 40% avoided the topic of terrorist

attacks in their conversations, 24% declared problems with falling asleep, and 17% had nightmares (Randall, Marshall and Galea, 2004).

Moreover, researchers examined people who have seen the worst images on the TV news; e.g., with people falling out of windows of the top floors of twin towers of the World Trade Center. Many months after the attack, researchers noted some correlation. People who were constantly watching TV news about the attack had more chance of experiencing PTSD symptoms. The results of this research also showed that 58% of people who spent more than thirteen hours in front of the TV had symptoms of PTSD. However, only 37% of people who spend 0–3 hours in front of the TV had the same problem (Randall, Marshall and Galea, 2004). The results of this research show that people overwhelmed with information and images from the terrorist attack on World Trade Center had more problems with PTSD. From 3.1 million New Yorkers, 520,000 have PTSD (Goode and Eakin, 2002). PTSD results in more problems than just nightmares and stress. People who suffer from PTSD also have problems with stimulants such as alcohol, cigarettes, or marijuana. More than 28% of people declared that their use of alcohol, cigarettes, or marijuana increased after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center (Randall, Marshall and Galea, 2004).

9. Conclusion

In the beginning of the essay I pointed out that TV news provides us with new information from around the world. The foregoing discussion attempted to show that TV news can sometimes endanger us all. The above arguments prove that TV news can exacerbate our stress, panic, and mental illness. The essay shows that American TV news increased PTSD symptoms in people. This disease is very complex and its symptoms differ, ranging from minor nightmares to tormenting suicidal thoughts. TV messages caused the symptoms not only in adults but also in children. Television stations constantly showed the same terrifying images. Society is not resistant enough to not react emotionally to images of people jumping out of the windows and dying. America was in panic because of permanent exposure to this tragedy. The 9/11 terrorists aimed for exactly that: to spread panic and fear among US citizens. As a result, we have more terrorist attacks in the world. More people who believe in Allah want to take part in a religious war because of a promise of being saved in the future. Due to television news, such behavior became popular not only in America but around the world. TV news made the whole world afraid of terrorism.

Those who participate in creating television media should be aware of the possible consequences of their activities. In the age of commercialism,

where financial profits hold the most important position, television pushes responsibility to the background. It is difficult for television to stay reliable, responsible, and gain viewers at the same time. However, we should consider if the consequences of constantly spreading this kind of information does not cause more damage than we think. In order to avoid spreading general fear, TV stations could inform without violent images. People should have access to reliable information, however it does not mean that we need to see content which can cause psychiatric disorders, as TV news caused after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre.

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