

## Echoes of Terrorism in Today's U.S. Classrooms: A Re-Reading of Media Used to Teach about 9/11

**Jeremy Stoddard**

University of Wisconsin-Madison, U.S.A.

[jdstoddard@wisc.edu](mailto:jdstoddard@wisc.edu)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5930-6723>

### Article Info

Received: March 23, 2021

Revised: June 11, 2021

Accepted: June 20, 2021

 <https://doi.org/10.29173/css26>

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 International license. (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>)

### ABSTRACT

Nearly 20 years after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York, Washington D.C., and Shanksville, PA there is a yearly ritual in a majority of US Schools. On the anniversary each year, teachers and students across the US learn about the attacks and memorialize the events. In many classrooms this is done through witnessing the events much like in 2001 for most of the world – through watching news or documentary footage of the events. In this article I use Hall's concepts of encoding and decoding as well as socio-cultural theories to read these media representations both in the context of 2001 and again 20 years later to understand how these events are placed into broader narratives of US history. Many teachers today focus on the shock and horror of the events, an approach I argue is problematic as the affective response is emphasized over the historical context and consequences. Instead of using these media to foster collective memory, they could instead be viewed as primary sources to inquire into the historical context of the events and response in the form of the Global War on Terror. This approach would allow students to better understand the events leading to the attacks and the impact that the resulting responses by the US and other Western nations have had on their lives and the lives of others around the globe (e.g., Islamophobia). After 20 years of conflict after these attacks it is time to both remember the victims of 9/11 as well as understand why it happened and the global toll of the response.

### KEYWORDS

September 11, 2001; terrorism; media studies; history; collective memory

**Introduction:**  
**“Islamic Extremist is to Islam as \_\_\_\_\_ is to Christianity.”**

On October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2001 the popular Aaron Sorkin-produced U.S. television series *The West Wing*, about a fictional president and his staff, broadcast a special episode in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (9/11) on New York, Virginia and Pennsylvania (Sorkin & Misiano, 2001). This episode, titled *Isaac and Ishmael*, was quickly produced and included the fictional White House in a lock down as a terrorist threat loomed. The message of the episode was to warn against profiling Muslim citizens as potential terror suspects. It foretold what would become real issues of surveillance, torture, and harassment of suspected terrorists and violence toward Muslim and Sikh populations in the United States. This response was not as prophetic as it may seem today – but was instead rooted in an understanding of how quickly nationalistic fervor and xenophobia would paint all Muslims or those assumed to be Muslim as terrorists (Abhasakun, 2017).

The answer to the fill in the blank question posed in the episode—“Islamic extremist is to Islam as \_\_\_\_\_ is to Christianity”—seemed somewhat more prophetic than the anticipated response toward Muslim Americans. This question was posed in the episode to a group of middle school students under lock down in the White House – and the answer provided by another staff member was “KKK” (aka, Ku Klux Klan). Of course, this answer in today’s context may seem divine given the January 6<sup>th</sup> invasion of the U.S. Capital led by White supremacist groups. However, Sorkin’s response in *West Wing* was simply informed by a long list of domestic terrorism, or terrorism committed by individuals or groups within their own country. These incidents occurred throughout the 1990s, had a lineage dating back to the days of Reconstruction after the U.S. Civil War, and are on the rise again today. These are the echoes of terror to which the editors of this special issue refer.

Viewed today, in the wake of the January 6<sup>th</sup> attack on the U.S. Capital by White nationalist groups hoping to disrupt the peaceful transfer of power from the Trump administration to the Biden administration (Roose, March 4, 2021), this reference to the KKK seems even more appropriate. Signs at the “insurrection” at the capital included references to the Bible and Christianity. Among these groups are members of the Qanon phenomenon that believed Donald Trump would be the savior against a ring of Democratic politicians bent on pedophilia and world domination (Roose, 2021). This same group, and those orchestrating the conspiracy theories that fuel them, have their roots back to the 9/11 attacks. From the 9/11 attacks emerged Alex Jones, a primary instigator of conspiracy theories, as well as other anti-government and White nationalist groups (Stahl, September 6, 2011). These groups have helped to fuel the polarized, nationalistic, right wing, and anti-Semitic groups that stormed the U.S. Capital. Teachers likely debated having their students watch these events unfold (or discuss them in their virtual classes) in similar ways to the decision to allow classes to watch the 9/11 terrorist attacks unfold on national news programs (Will & Sawchuck, 2021). However, in 2021 students and teachers could view the events in real time through numerous social media feeds instead of just relying on national news coverage.

In this paper I examine how news programs from 9/11 and the many documentary films produced using footage from that day continue to be used in U.S. classrooms. In fact, they were the source most frequently identified to teach about the events of 9/11 – and this teaching largely occurs on the day of the anniversary and focuses on (re)witnessing the attacks and memorializing the heroes and victims of the day (Stoddard, 2019). Of course, the young people in those classes today have no living memory of the events of 9/11. In this article, I explore what it means for students to view these media recordings of 9/11 as their primary understanding of the events. This is particularly poignant given the upcoming 20-year anniversary of the attacks and the current U.S. context where teachers have reported sharp increases in students referencing conspiracy theories and misinformation about 9/11 in classes as well as references to rhetoric associating

Muslims with terrorism in the context of the proposed and then partially implemented “Muslim travel ban” (Stoddard, 2019).

In order to inform this re-reading of these video recordings of 9/11 in today's context, I utilize Stuart Hall's (1980) theory of encoding and decoding. The teachers' reported goal of using these media sources is to help young people (re)experience the events of 9/11 in the same way they may have experienced them as a shock, as an event that brought the nation together, and as an event that shaped U.S. foreign policy for the next 20 years. Using the concepts of encoding and decoding within particular political and historical contexts allows for an interpretation of how these readings of media may shift in meaning and in effect throughout today's classrooms. This re-reading of 9/11 media will also inform suggestions for teacher practice to help their students better contextualize and understand the events of 9/11 as well as how these events link to continued political and social ideologies and actions in the present-day United States and beyond.

### **Analytical Framework**

In order to make sense of how media may have been received or decoded in the United States and around the world (including teachers) on the day of the attacks with how they may be viewed today, I utilize Hall's concept of encoding and decoding. Hall's (1980, 1982, 1996) highly influential contribution, relying on semiotics and building from theory within mass communications, recognized not only the constructed nature of media but also that media was shaped or encoded in a particular context and influenced by the views of those producing media as well as the dominant ideologies of the time. Hall also theorized that a process of decoding these messages was dependent on who the “reader” of the media was—their views, experiences, and ideologies.

This process of looking at media as symbol systems within discourses between producers and audiences provides researchers who study media effects the ability to examine the relationship between intended messages in media or preferred reads in Hall's (1980) work, as well as unintended or even oppositional reads. This reading is in part dependent on whether the message being engaged with by audiences matches or differs from the ideological views of the producer. However, this notion of media messages largely reflecting dominant ideologies has also been highly critiqued. As Pillai (1992) noted in his re-reading of Hall's theory,

Hall seems to assume unproblematically that the preferred meaning and the preferred reading of a text are equivalent to the dominant ideology. The process of “preferring” the meaning of a text, at the moment of encoding, is simply read as repeating the dominant ideology. A similar problem occurs at the moment of decoding. (p. 222)

Pillai (1992) noted that Hall's later work better integrated a more sophisticated notion of ideology using the work of Gramsci and the conceptualization of a theory of articulation. This articulation theory recognized that there is no determination in media messaging but that context and time shapes how messages are encoded and decoded. In this way Hall argues that a media message is “not ‘eternal’ but has constantly to be renewed, which can under some circumstances disappear or be overthrown, leading to old linkages being dissolved and new connections-rearticulations-being forged” (Hall, 1985, p. 113). Using the process of encoding and decoding in this way allows for interpretations of the views and articulations of why teachers from our study use footage of the day of the 9/11 attacks. It also affords an exploration of how their decoding, shaped both from their experience that day as well as every year since, may compare to the decoding or reading of their students, who

were not alive on that day. Further, it allows for a comparison of the preferred reading of these images and how they were encoded in 2001 and now—almost 20 years later.

Within history education, ideologies of the type Hall refers to are often present in the forms of historical narratives and narrative templates used to make sense of the past (e.g., Foner, 1999; Wertsch, 2002). These narratives, which in U.S. history textbooks and other forms of official narratives often take the form of U.S. history as a narrative of freedom and progress – of exceptionalism and moral high ground – very much shape how citizens make sense of past and future events (Foner, 1999). These narratives, after years of reinforcement, take the form of narrative schema or templates for making sense of historical and present events that emerge (Wertsch, 2002). As some of the studies illustrate in the next section, these narratives are used to define what the attacks of 9/11 represent (i.e., explain why they happened) and justify the U.S. and other nations' responses. They also shape the dominant collective memory that emerged and is reinforced yearly on the anniversary in many schools across the country.

### **Previous Research and Relevant Literature**

The research presented here is part of a line of research on how 9/11 has been included in U.S. curriculum and academic standards that started in 2003. At that time, I began working with a team of researchers focused on analyzing curriculum developed to teach on the first anniversary of the 9/11 attacks (Hess & Stoddard, 2007). In particular we focused on analyzing the curriculum using key questions such as: What is 9/11? What is terrorism? And how should the United States respond? The resounding answer at that time was the view that 9/11 was unprecedented and a shaped a moment of national and global support behind the United States and against terrorism.

Beyond this general theme, however, we noticed that groups producing the curriculum had varied and diverse goals for their specific curriculum – toward tolerance, understanding U.S. Foreign Policy, nationalism, and specific actions like voting. We also found that the use of moving images—from news broadcasts of the day and custom educational videos created by these organizations—held a prominent role in these curricula.

After this initial study we began looking at how 9/11 and the War on Terror (WoT) were integrated in other forms of curriculum and policy documents. The Global War on Terror was the term used by the administration of then-U.S. President Bush to describe intelligence, military, and foreign and economic policy action against terror groups and threats – though almost exclusively focused on Muslim terrorist groups from outside of the US. In order to understand the evolving role 9/11 and the WoT played in U.S. curriculum and academic standards, we applied similar questions and processes to examine the first and second editions of popular textbooks published after 9/11 (e.g., Hess, Stoddard & Murto, 2008; Stoddard, Hess & Hammer, 2011), followed by an analysis of two iterations of how 9/11 and the WoT were integrated into state academic standards (e.g., Stoddard & Hess, 2008b; Stoddard, Hess, & Brooks 2016). Across these studies several themes remained constant:

- 1) 9/11 was a horrific event that caused the world to rally to the U.S. side.
- 2) There is a focus on heroes and heroism from the day.
- 3) There was conceptual confusion of terrorism – with definitions and examples not aligning within the same text. There was also a consistent emphasis on examples of terrorism by Islamic fundamentalists with few from domestic terrorist groups who were not Muslim (e.g., White nationalists).
- 4) Finally, there was little inclusion of the controversies related to the attacks, and the U.S. and allied response to 9/11, until about ten years after the attacks. Even then, certain topics were deemed

controversial (e.g., Patriot Act) while others were not (e.g., evidence used to justify invasion of Iraq, Guantanamo Bay detainees).<sup>1</sup>

In the few studies done with young people in the years following the attacks, many similar themes arose among U.S. and Canadian youth as they were asked to make sense of the attacks and their significance. Levesque (2003), for example, found that the young Canadians he studied generally viewed the attacks of 9/11 as significant, but attributed the motivation behind the attacks to be a form of jealousy on the part of Muslims for perceived wealth and sophistication of the United States. However, Levesque found that students using more sophisticated historical reasoning were able to show a better understanding or empathetic views of Muslims (though still as Other), and also recognized that the motivation behind the attacks could be an attempt to raise global awareness of, or challenge to, U.S. imperialism and interventions in the Middle East.

In contrast to the views of young Canadian participants in Levesque's study of potential geopolitical reasoning behind the attacks and the significance, Schweber (2006) found that within a religious education setting young people viewed the attacks through narratives of Christianity to make sense of the attacks. Schweber also noted that through the prayers and discussions of the eighth-grade class she observed that using the narrative schema that God controls all that happens, even events like 9/11, led to a lack of belief in human agency and even the need to do good in the world. Schweber also makes the case that these eighth-graders are not alone but are representative of the large fundamentalist Christian demographic within the United States. In their eyes, 9/11 is a fundamentally religious event. Beyond the use of religious- based narrative frameworks, Schweber also noted that

The situation is hardly particular to fundamentalist Christian religious private schools... history education in U.S. public schools typically knits events into a narrative framework, and "not ... just any old narrative," but into the "dominant narrative of U.S. history—the story of freedom and progress." (166–67)

The dominant narrative of 9/11 within the United States very much fit within the story of freedom and progress; as noted in the studies above, the perception for many was that the United States was attacked because Muslim terrorists hated their freedom and progress. The United States was attacked because of what it stood for – a quest for freedom – and not for its long history of political, military, and economic intervention in the Middle East. This narrative of Muslim terrorists and the spectacle of terrorism, most notably the replaying of an airliner crashing into an exploding building, fueled the notion that America was under attack and needed to take action (Kellner, 2006). This perception and representations of Muslims also reinforced notions of "good" and "bad" Muslims, with the Muslim as terrorist narrative used to justify policy decisions and military actions (Choudhury, 2006).

Beyond these initial studies of how young people made sense of 9/11, few studies examine what has been taught or learned about the events of 9/11 or WoT since. Therefore, we conducted a national survey of secondary teachers to understand how the events of 9/11 and the ensuing WoT are included in U.S. classrooms (Stoddard, 2019). From this survey, which was conducted in late Fall 2018 and included responses from 1047 secondary social studies teachers from across the United States, the themes outlined above remain consistent – even while the students being taught today have no memory of the actual events. The survey was conducted

---

<sup>1</sup> The USA Patriot Act included provisions establishing the Department of Homeland Security and Travel Safety Administration (TSA) after 9/11 as well as more controversial programs such as electronic surveillance both in and out of the US. Other controversial topics related to 9/11 often missing from the curriculum was the evidence used by the US to justify the invasion of Iraq, namely that Iraq had chemical and biological weapons, and the use of CIA rendition sites and the US Naval Base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, as a site to detain indefinitely combatants captured as part of the Global War on Terror.

using a random sample of 25,000 teachers who were recruited via email to complete an online survey. A subsample of 30 survey respondents were then invited to participate in a follow up phone interview to gain a deeper understanding of how they taught about 9/11 and the WoT and what challenges they faced.

In addition to the themes we observed, our findings illustrate what was actually being taught in U.S. classrooms, including:

- 1) That teachers overwhelmingly teach about these events on the day of the anniversary;
- 2) Key topics most often taught include the role of then President George W. Bush, al Qaeda and its leader, Osama bin Laden, and the locations of the attacks; and
- 3) Many other details of the attacks and WoT are largely missing – most notably an analysis of events leading up to the attacks and controversial issues surrounding the invasion of Iraq, Guantanamo Bay detainees, and the role of the U.S. in the Middle East historically.

The narratives constructed and reinforced throughout these studies reinforce the dominant narrative of freedom and progress in U.S. history, and those details that may challenge this narrative are largely absent. The questions raised by this work, then, are what specific narratives are students encountering about 9/11 in U.S. classrooms – and what form are students encountering them in?

### **Echoes of Terrorism in U.S. Classrooms Through Moving Images**

What emerged in our survey results is a richer understanding of *how* teachers are engaging students in learning about 9/11 and the WoT, and what sources and representations are used most often. Overwhelmingly, 76% of our respondents reported using some kind of documentary or television footage in teaching about these events. This is almost 20% more than the next highest selected practice of talking about a current event in relation to the WoT (58%) or talking about their personal or a family experience related to 9/11 (49%). Teachers did report including a wide range of topics, including the concept of terrorism, Osama bin Laden, the sites attacked (e.g., WTC, the Pentagon, Shanksville, PA), and at least in U.S. history courses, emphasized the role of firefighters and first responders (68%). As part of teaching about the WoT, teachers reported including in some form the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq at a much higher rate than other more controversial aspects of the WoT, such as the rise of Islamophobia in the United States and the legal battles around detainees held at Guantanamo Bay.

As part of the survey, we collected data through open-ended items that asked respondents to share what films, literature, or other materials they use in teaching the events. These sources overwhelmingly reinforce the themes previously identified—such as the heroism of the day, the United States as victim, and the shock of the attacks. As the previous statistic might suggest, television news footage (e.g., *NBC*, *ABC*) from the day of the attacks and various documentary films made for the first to even the tenth anniversary dominate the list of sources (e.g., *9/11*, *102 Minutes*, *The Boat Lift*, *The Man in the Red Bandana*). What we also found from follow-up interviews with a small sample of the survey respondents is that the predominant way of engaging students on the anniversary of 9/11 each year (for teachers who were alive and teaching or in college at the time) was to attempt to relive their experiences watching these events unfold on screen. These teachers report wanting their students to feel what they felt that day and in the days that followed. Their goal in doing this was to help young people feel the shock and horror many people in the United States felt on the day of the attacks as they witnessed the events in the same way. It is important to note that while their goal is not to traumatize their students, these traumatic images can be unsettling and therefore should be accompanied

by a space for discussion and reflection and to work through their emotional reaction to difficult knowledge<sup>2</sup> represented in these videos (Garrett, 2011; Zembylas, 2014).

Because this data was collected through open-ended items, it is difficult to discern the exact video or documentary being referred to in all cases as some simply reported “YouTube” or “CNN” or “History Channel.” Others, however, identified specific episodes of the PBS Frontline series or specific documentaries produced by and shown on the History Channel. The vast majority of the respondents specifically referenced video material focused heavily on news coverage and other footage from the day of the attacks. Beyond the raw news footage that is available online from that day, numerous documentaries or television news specials that were produced for the first, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> anniversaries made up the majority of videos the teachers reported using.

Far fewer teachers reported using docudramas or historical feature films. Those identified most frequently include *Flight 93* (2006) and *The Flight that Fought Back* (2005), which told the story of passengers who attempted to take back control of United flight 93 as it headed toward Washington, DC and ended up crashing into a field near Shanksville, PA. The only other feature film identified by more than one teacher was *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2011). Other narrative documentary films that use 9/11 as a political subject to explore Bush administration policy (*Fahrenheit 9/11*, 2004) and as a subject of conspiracy theories (*Loose Change*, 2005) were also identified by more than one teacher. Given the relatively small number of teachers reporting to use these types of films, I focus my analysis here on the more commonly used videos that include documentary or news footage of the day of the attacks.

For the news and documentaries used to show the shock and horrors of the day, well over 100 respondents specifically identified a news network (e.g., NBC, ABC, CNN) or more generically a YouTube video from the day. Others identified specific documentaries or news specials produced and released for the first anniversary or one of the key anniversaries after (e.g., 10<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>). It is likely that the 76% of U.S. History teacher respondents and over 50% of world history and civics teachers are using a video source that portrays the images of the day of the attacks, including the second plane hitting the World Trade Center, the towers on fire and potentially collapsing into a cloud of debris. It is difficult to know exactly how many of our respondents used particular films or videos as they were not required to identify a specific name and many included a descriptor but not the exact title. The four most frequently identified documentary films include:

- 1) *9/11* (2002), a film by the French Naudeaut brothers who were in New York making a film about probationary firefighters when the attacks occurred. The film interweaves the perspectives of NY firefighters from the day with street level footage of the attempts they made to save the World Trade Center (WTC) towers and those who worked there. Of note, the film includes one of the only recordings of the first plane hitting the WTC.
- 2) *102 Minutes that Changed America* (2008), a production from the History Channel that utilizes a large amount of footage captured on the streets of New York during the attacks and tells the story of those who experienced the attacks in the city.
- 3) *Inside 9-11* (2005), from National Geographic, is a two-episode program (4 hours total) that importantly includes the background and history of al Qaeda leading up to the events as part of Episode 1, and a more common focus on the events of the day as well as the experiences of firefighters and other heroes in Episode 2.
- 4) *America Remembers 9/11* (2002), CNN production that focuses on the attacks and immediate aftermath with commentary provided by CNN anchors and journalists. This two-episode documentary

---

<sup>2</sup> Difficult knowledge, as theorized by Deborah Britzman (1998) from a psychoanalytic frame refers to encounters with representations of social trauma, such as Anne Frank's diary.

includes minute by minute CNN coverage of the attacks with in-depth reporting of the days that followed.

These four specific films were identified between roughly 70 (9/11) to over 20 (*America Remembers 9/11*) times. However, given that only a portion of respondents gave us specific titles and others provided rough descriptors (e.g., CNN documentary) we can assume these specific titles are used even more broadly given their prominence in our study.

In addition to these films that focus on the day more broadly, two other films focused on specific incidents from that day. One, *The Man in the Red Bandana*, is a reference to either the longer documentary film (2017) or a shorter ESPN segment that was part of the Outside the Lines series (2016). Both tell the story of Wes Crowther, a young trader who worked in the WTC and who became well known as someone who made multiple trips to help workers make their way through smoke and blocked stairways to escape the building until he perished along with roughly 3,000 others. Another short film identified as a resource is the film *Boatlift* (2011). Boatlift is a short film about the role that ferries and other boats played to evacuate people from Manhattan after public transportation and the tunnels were shut down. The ferries and other boats assisted in evacuating thousands of people from Manhattan on 9/11. The film, narrated by actor Tom Hanks, has a particularly heroic narrative and tone.

### **"Oh, it's beautiful, it's a great day, today is September 11 blah blah blah"**

Teachers who reported using the news footage or films gave us some indication of how and why they were being viewed and what the goals were. This data was collected from both open-ended items in the initial survey and through interviews with a small subset of our sample of respondents. What emerged was the clear finding that not only were the majority of teachers largely teaching about the events of 9/11 and the WoT largely on the day of the anniversary each year, but their main focus was a memorialization of these events and the desire to feel the same shock and horror they felt versus a deeper understanding of how these events have impacted their lives. As one teacher noted, he provides the context of the day and uses news footage starting in the moments before the first plane hits WTC Tower One and the anchors noting "it's beautiful, it's a great day" to illustrate how much of a shock the attack represented.

As students today do not have a direct memory of 9/11, teachers noted shifting how they taught about the events and the role that showing video from the day played in their instruction. One teacher we interviewed noted,

as we've gotten removed... I will say that topic ten years ago, when the kids were in grade school, and it scared them what they saw on TV, there was a lot more anger and hostility towards Middle Easterners. That has-that has changed quite a bit, but because they personally didn't see that happen that day.

Many teachers talked about sharing their own experiences on the day of the attacks, which focused on their own shock and horror as well as changes that occurred that students may not be aware of given their lack of memory of pre-2001. This included the role of the Transportation Safety Administration (TSA) and airport security in particular. Teachers who were students in 2001 also emphasized their experiences to try to make them relatable, including one teacher from Virginia who noted,

I share my experience with [students], because I was in 7th grade when September 11th happened. I let the students ask questions about my experience. And then, I tell them, all right, now your assignment, since we live so close to The Pentagon, go home, ask your parents where they were at in the world, what was going on with them, and what their experience for September 11th was.

While the majority of teachers we interviewed referred to using the news footage from 9/11 as a way to experience the day as a form of collective memory, others focused on a more critical approach to examining the news footage and other video accounts. For example, one teacher from Texas asked her students to look at footage from multiple networks from that day and other sources to examine the interpretations of what was going on during the attacks. She noted,

I have to be really careful and make sure that I find balanced information, and...I could do the bias, and we could look at things from different networks and see, okay, well what's the slant on this one? What's the slant on the other? But I really do have to bring in more articles written... newspaper articles, other material [in addition to the news footage].

Other teachers we interviewed noted that their schools still have a memorial ceremony on the anniversary of the attacks or play a tribute video school wide. While many of the teachers we talked with described different ways that they integrated the events of 9/11 in their curriculum (e.g., as part of a unit on the Middle East), there was a consistent emphasis on engaging students in the events on the day of the anniversary in the schools where they taught. These activities often included teachers sharing their personal experiences and memories of that, and the use of videos of the attacks or other sources to memorialize the events. So, with this intense focus on the events of the day viewed through news media and documentary footage, and the continued emphasis on 9/11 as a memorial as well as historical event, I focus on media that represent these moments using Hall's (1980) interpretive framework of encoding and decoding to explore the intended readings twenty years ago and how this might be decoded in the present. In particular, I juxtapose the news footage from 2001, viewed by many Americans and others around the world, with a widely viewed documentary released in 2002 that illustrates how the story of 9/11 was ensconced in narratives that still dominate this history today in U.S. classrooms.

### **Encoding and Decoding on 9/11 and One Year Later**

In order to understand how people in the United States may have read the events of 9/11, at least the vast majority whose witnessing of the events were on national television, I first present an analysis and synopsis of the extended coverage provided by NBC on the morning of 9/11. What unfolds is not only the shock and horror of the day but the emerging narrative of what 9/11 is, as well as important details that were lost in that dominant narrative and in U.S. classrooms.

#### ***"This is so shocking..."***

When watching the opening segment of NBC's top-rated morning news show, the Today Show, on the morning of September 11, 2001 the top stories included the possible return of basketball superstar Michael Jordan to the NBA, an unmanned surveillance plane being shot down in Iraq's no-fly zone, and the discussion of the U.S. Presidential Election from 2000 that was finally decided by the U.S. Supreme Court as recounts were ongoing in the state of Florida. On a lighter note, anchor Katie Couric and comedian Tracy Ulman discussed whether or not Couric wore thong underwear and Couric also conducted an interview with singer Harry Belafonte.

At 8:45 a.m., as Couric wraps up her interview with Belafonte they move to a commercial break with a quick pan of the crowd outside of their Manhattan studio. As they pan, you see a Today Show staffer quickly look up as they see and hear something that takes place further down the island of Manhattan. At this moment a large airliner is flown directly into One WTC. As they come back from break, co-anchor Matt Lauer breaks away from his interview of a book author at 8:51 and alerts the audience of the emerging story of a plane hitting the WTC. While the early moments of coverage – which includes a stable image of the two Trade

Center towers from the NBC building in Midtown – include an attempt to figure out what happened and descriptions of the shock from people on ground calling in, by 9:01, Matt Lauer brings up the previous terrorist attack on the tower in 1993 and asks “was this purely an accident or could this have been an intentional act?”

Moments later, at 9:03 as they talk with an NBC producer who lives near the tower, the producer gasps out as the second plane hits the other tower, Two WTC. A large fireball could be seen on the camera feed focused on the towers which had been running constant since soon after the first plane hit. Couric calmly states what many people across the United States are thinking as they watch these events unfold on their televisions – “this is so shocking.” Lauer agrees, noting “this is the most shocking video I have ever seen” as they replay the 2<sup>nd</sup> plane flying into the second tower and then notes more assuredly at 9:05: “Now you have to move from talk about the possibility of an accident to something deliberate that has happened here.” By 9:15, there is a report of the planes being hijacked and by 9:17, a more detailed reference to the 1993 bombing of the WTC is included, followed by a reporter from the Pentagon saying that the intelligence community is stating that there were no credible threats of hijacked planes or a terrorist attacks.

Over the next twenty minutes the anchors share reports as they stream in from reporters and U.S. officials on the phone. One report was from a call a reporter had with an employee inside the firm Cantor Fitzgerald in the WTC. When asked what is happening, the employee replied, “we’re [blanking] dying - that is what is happening...” The first mention of Osama bin Laden occurs at 9:33, along with the statement “who as far as we know at this minute that he is in Afghanistan,” and further reference to previous terrorist attacks by al Qaeda are referenced by 9:40. Moments later, they interrupt and go back to Jim Miklaszewski at the Pentagon who describes what he believes was some kind of explosion at the Pentagon, which is later confirmed to be a third plane. As helicopters fly by, Miklaszewski says, “I am getting a little nervous when I hear an aircraft go by.”

By 9:50, U.S. air traffic is shut down and international flights from Europe are being diverted primarily to Canada. Less than ten minutes later, at 9:59, Two WTC collapses live on camera. By 10:05, Osama bin Laden and his network are identified as key suspects, as “the one terror leader who could pull off this kind of attack...” though reporters note, “but it’s far too early to be certain.” Soon, reports are in that the President and Air Force One are headed back from Florida with an Air Force escort, even while at 10:25 there is a report of an additional hijacked plane headed to Washington, DC with people there being ordered to find shelter (this was later known to be United flight 93 that crashed in Pennsylvania). At 10:29, One WTC collapses and southern Manhattan is enveloped in smoke, debris, and dust. Veteran news anchor Tom Brokaw, who has now joined the Today Show, deliberately states, “The profile of Manhattan has been changed; there has been a declaration of war by terrorists on the U.S.” Watching the live broadcast from NBC [or another network], which many of our teachers reported doing in some form, gives a literal bird’s-eye view on the events unfolding, while a narrative of terrorism and the likely suspects emerges. Within the period of two hours, U.S. audiences watching the Today Show went from a conversation about Katie Couric’s underwear to the collapse of key symbols of New York and American capitalism in the form of the WTC Towers. Government officials and veteran broadcasters essentially issued a declaration of war on the terrorists [and bin Laden in particular]. The encoding of these events occurs in a context of known terrorist threats, given the previous events in the 1990s attributed to al Qaeda affiliates and within the narrative of America as “the strongest nation in the world.”

Millions in the United States experienced the shock of the New York anchors and reporters as they watched the events unfold live – even if they were thousands of miles away watching it on TV. As the coverage continues, the focus shifts to firefighters and rescue personnel and the narrative shifts to the lives lost and heroes who emerge from the story in lower Manhattan. While you see narratives emphasizing nationalism and U.S. exceptionalism emerge, you are also exposed to the anchors talking about terrorist events leading up to

9/11, comparisons to domestic terrorism and the Murrah Federal Building bombing in Oklahoma City in particular, and the potential implications for airport security and additional surveillance of foreign nationals in the United States in particular. However, all you see on the screen for hours while this dialogue plays out is the camera feed focused on the WTC towers and then the rubble and dust in the place where they stood. Less than three hours after the first tower was hit, a picture of Osama bin Laden was broadcast across the United States and world. In addition to his picture are reports that he had declared there would be a major attack on a U.S. target three weeks before 9/11 and that he was thought to be in Afghanistan. Bin Laden's image and the reports of his whereabouts are projected in front of a background of thick smoke billowing from the WTC site. At 10:50 am, roughly two hours after the first plane hit, Tom Brokaw proclaims, "The United State will change as a result of all of this..."

In these approximately four hours of coverage, the Today Show hosts and their experts do a better job than textbooks almost 20 years later do in describing key aspects of the events. These include placing the attacks in the context of the growing threat of global terrorism by al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, the role that Afghanistan's ruling Taliban played in given this group a safe haven, and by placing the attacks in the context of other domestic and international terrorist attacks (e.g., Oklahoma City).

### **9/11: Echoes of Terrorism**

By comparison to the news footage, our second most widely viewed film, *9/11* (2002), is anything but a bird's-eye view. This film uses footage captured primarily on the day of the attacks along with interviews of those who were there. First released six months after the attacks, *9/11* provides a street-level view and helps to cement the focus on New York firefighters and emergency personnel as heroes. Made by French filmmakers and their NYC firefighter partner, who had gained access to follow NY probationary firefighters who were assigned to a station near the WTC, *9/11* accounts for the experiences of these emergency personnel and adds a layer of shock and horror as those near the towers experienced. The film includes one of the few recordings of the first plane flying through Manhattan aimed at One WTC as one of the filmmakers was on a call with their firefighters near the towers and happened to turn his camera on as he heard and saw the plane flying by. This film shows the horrors and shock of the day and has a higher level of encoding narratives than the news broadcast from the day. These filmmakers had their own experiences in the dust and debris – and directly witnessed the collapse of the towers that led to the death of many of the firefighter colleagues. Those experiences are deeply encoded in the film. *9/11* is narrated by Jim Hannon, former firefighter and filmmaker, as well as the Naudet brothers, who filmed the action.

If the Today Show coverage provided the opportunity for inquiry (and possibly fed conspiracy theories), the intended reading of films such as *9/11* is steeped in the dominant national collective memory of the events of 9/11. It starts with Hannon, who is also a firefighter from Ladder 1, the unit the filmmakers were following and located just seven blocks from the WTC, stating "Nobody...nobody expected September 11<sup>th</sup>." Seconds after this statement, you see the reaction on the ground of people running from the buildings as the first plane struck, and then Ladder 1 firefighters moving into position inside One WTC. Immediately, the narrative is set that the attack was unexpected and unprecedented and cemented the emphasis on heroism of the firefighters and other emergency personnel who responded to the WTC. The story follows Tony, a probie, or probationary fireman, who started with Ladder 1 in the summer of 2001.

The production of *9/11* is more sentimental, with Tony portrayed as an innocent young firefighter. The segment of the film prior to September 11<sup>th</sup> uses soft music and shows Tony learning how to be a NYFD firefighter. Footage prior to the attacks show the French filmmakers making dinner for the station and making inroads at getting accepted into the stationhouse. On a routine call inspecting a gas leak on the morning of

9/11, one of the cameramen happened to be filming as the first plane went overhead. Their camera captures the first plane crashing into One WTC from only several blocks away. The inclusion of first-person perspectives of the firefighting command and firefighters organizing from the WTC lobby highlights the challenges of the day. Elevators were out of commission, jet fuel poured down the shafts spreading the fire, and crews had to go up 80 stories with 60 plus pounds of gear just to get to the fire and start working.

Far more so than the Today Show coverage, the footage from 9/11 captures the chaos and horror from the streets. One cameraman is filming the reaction of people on the streets as the second plane hits. The other is in the lobby of One WTC filming debris through the windows as it falls after Two WTC is hit. What is truly compelling about the footage in the lobbies is how calmly the firefighters and in particular the commanders are while giving orders and trying to get their crews in position to put the fire out—and the belief that they could do it. Even when the lobby of One WTC is filled with dust, smoke and debris after Two WTC collapses, and the cameraman turns on his light to help everyone see the lobby area and wipes off his lens, the firefighter leadership is shown through a thick layer of dust and smoke ordering all firefighters to get out of the building. Here the film reinforces the horror faced by those on the ground as they realized the other tower has collapsed. Everything and everyone is covered in thick layers of dust. The film highlights the communications failures from the day—the challenges of communications—as cellular networks failed and the dust and debris limited radio traffic.

The toll on the firefighters is documented through this unique perspective on the events. As firefighters start to work their way back to the firehall after the collapse, you see them hugging and happy to see each other alive, and you see some collapsing or throwing up in a garbage can because of exhaustion and exposure to dust and debris. Shockingly, given the losses of the day—including 343 NY Fire Department members—all members of their firehall survived. This may be because they were one of the first units on the scene and were in the first tower to be hit until the mayday call went out to evacuate after Two WTC collapsed.

In the interview footage with these surviving firemen, the narrative of the day as it largely appears in classrooms is cemented. The narrator, filmmaker Hanlon states, “there is so much that we did not know that day—who attacked us and why,” in stark contrast to the newscasts attempts to answer those exact questions throughout the day. The film strikes a solemn and reflective tone, in its use of slow motion video and soundtrack in particular. It does not give the rousing nationalistic fervor some other 9/11 films do, but does feed into narratives that persist in curriculum and classrooms. As the firemen begin to work 12 hour shifts in support of the rescue and then recovery modes, our narrator states, “I just realized how evil evil could be.” The remainder of the film documents the impact of the attacks and attempts to find survivors and then highlights victims who have been emotionally, physically, and mentally harmed. Less than a year after the attacks, films such as *9/11* establish and reinforce the dominant collective narrative still presented in classrooms around the United States as the story of 9/11. This is a story that emphasizes the surprise and shock of the day, the heroism of firefighters and first responders, and the need for the United States to combat and destroy the threat of so-called evil Muslim terrorists.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The primary goal of the majority of the teachers we surveyed is to help students recognize the power of the events they witnessed in 2001, and to memorialize the losses of approximately 3000 people and the symbols of the WTC and Pentagon. News footage from the day and documentary films were viewed as the best medium to transmit this message and help students feel the way many teachers did in 2001. Decoding these films in today’s context, as part of a one-day activity used to teach about and memorialize the victims of 9/11 would likely lead to reinforce several themes. First, that the United States was attacked without any

provocation. Events such as terrorist attacks by al Qaeda should be taught alongside the role that the United States has played in Afghanistan and the Middle East historically. This is not to justify the attacks but to look at the events within the complex historical context. This is particularly important given the so-called Muslim travel ban attempted by the Trump administration, and its effects on students' views of Muslims in the United States (Yoder, 2020).

Second, the narrative that 9/11 would result in the United States declaring war on "evil" feeds into the national narrative of a quest for freedom and progress documented historically in the United States (Foner, 1998). As Journell (2018) and van Kessel (2017) note, this use of evil feeds the narrative of Muslims as terrorists and oversimplifies the context of terrorism and actions of terrorists. This narrative is played out in *9/11* in particular as the film follows a naïve and innocent probie firefighter as he experiences an unprovoked and unwarranted attack by an "evil" group that cost 3,000 U.S. lives—an attack that will provoke the U.S. to act from its moral high ground. If teachers use a film such as *9/11*, given it provides little to no historical context of 9/11 or of terrorism in general, students should explore the concept of evil and students' beliefs about it, as they risk reinforcing rather than challenging students' beliefs about the association of Muslims as terrorists and Muslims as inherently evil.

Third, the themes of these films focus on the traumatic impact of the day on many people across the United States and the world. Many teachers want students to feel some of what they felt that day. Using images and video in this way can be a method for engaging into an event or topic—to use emotion to engage in inquiry or the recognition of peoples' experiences in the past that results in some form of action. As Zembylas (2014) notes, using traumatic imagery in this way can also lead to empty sympathy that is performative, rather than developing understanding or taking action as a result. Without thoughtful debrief, engagement in context, and allowing space for students to work through their reactions to the traumatic imagery from 9/11, the goals of memorialization or using 9/11 as a way to help students consider issues today of continued conflict, or the need for tolerance, may lead to the opposite. Without engaging thoughtfully in the traumatic events and images of 9/11 and those that have come after in the Middle East in particular, we risk reinforcing simplistic narratives of good (U.S.) vs evil (Muslim terrorists) rather than engaging students in a much more complex historical context and series of events.

The stereotypical and dominant portrayal of Muslims as terrorists in U.S. media, such as television and Hollywood films, has already firmly established and sustained this narrative (Ramji, 2005, 2016). It is also reinforced by some news organizations and by the portrayal of terrorism and 9/11 in secondary history textbooks (Journell, 2017; Saleem & Thomas, 2011). This ongoing narrative has then been weaponized in attempts by the former Trump administration in the United States to ban individuals from a select group of largely Muslim countries from entering the country (Corbin, 2017). To challenge this narrative, these representations must be questioned and more nuanced or alternative narratives and perspectives explored. Unfortunately, this likely cannot take place in a one-day lesson on the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks—especially in a time when young people have no memory and little knowledge of these events.

However, we also know from our survey that many teachers report attempting to place these events in historical context (62% US History, 47% World History). World history teachers in particular reported also placing 9/11 as a global event within a broader international historical context (41%). Using clips in particular from the NBC live broadcast, teachers could engage students in identifying questions for generating inquiry while viewing. Doing this, even with selected excerpts of the video, could lead to questions about why the U.S. military was flying over Iraq, why the United States knew who bin Laden was and had been, to some degree, expecting a terrorist act by his organization; how 9/11 compares to domestic terrorism being committed by anti-government and White supremacist groups in the 1990s; and what the likely short-term and long-term actions and impacts may be in the U.S. and internationally (e.g., surveillance, airport security). They can also

use evidence on bin Laden, al Qaeda, and the terrorist attacks the group committed to examine how the ideologies these groups stand for are not those of Islam, nor Muslims in the U.S. or elsewhere in the world. Instead, they represent extreme ideological views resulting from long and complex histories of colonialism and imperialism, capitalism and the Cold War—largely political and not religious ideologies.

Films about historical events often tell us as much about the political and social moment of when they were produced than the history they portray (Stoddard, 2014); as such, using news or other documentary footage from the day of the attacks – pending it is not traumatic for students – makes some sense. As noted above, the historical context explored within that broadcast goes beyond many textbook sections on 9/11. However, framing this viewing within the narrative template of U.S. history and from the perspective of experiencing it as a witness in order to memorialize also frames the decoding. It is not just the ideologies of the intended read that matter but also the influences of time and distance from the events that may influence any decoding (Hall, 1985; Pillai, 1992)—essentially this decoding takes place as an echo to use the metaphor for this special issue. Echoes are always distorted and interpreted from the position of those who hear it and impacted by distance and direction.

It is for this reason that the *West Wing* example from the introduction may seem like they predicted that profiling of Muslims in the US, or the likelihood of increased surveillance after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. It may seem prophetic in 2021 to compare al Qaeda and other global fundamentalist groups with the Ku Klux Klan after the January 6<sup>th</sup> assault on the Capital. However, when looked at historically and in the context of 2001, these connections could be - and were - made and debated after watching NBC's Today Show on the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

### Funding

Funding for the survey study was provided by the September 11<sup>th</sup> Education Trust. Additional funding for the project was provided by William & Mary and the University of Wisconsin – Madison School of Education.

### Acknowledgements

The following faculty and graduate students have worked on some aspect of this study: Diana Hess, Paul Fitchett, Brian Gibbs, Catherine Mason Hammer, Brooks Henne, Taehan Kim, Amy Kuenker, Shannon Murto, Daniel Berman and Leila Walker.

### References

- Abhasakun, T. (2017, April 1). *When you “look Muslim”: Middle Eastern minorities also targets of anti-Muslim bigotry*. Conatus News. <https://conatusnews.com/when-you-look-muslim-middle-eastern-minorities-too-are-targets-of-anti-muslim-bigotry/>
- Britzman, D. (1998). *Lost subjects, contested objects: Toward a psychoanalytic inquiry of learning*. SUNY Press.
- Choudhury, C. A. (2006). Terrorists & Muslims: The construction, performance and regulation of Muslim identities in the post-9/11 United States. *Rutgers Journal of Law and Religion*, 7(3), 1–67.
- Corbin, C. M. (2017). Terrorists are always Muslim but never white: At the intersection of critical race theory and propaganda. *Fordham L. Review*, 86(1), 455–485
- Foner, E. (1999). *The story of American freedom*. WW Norton & Company.

- Garrett, H. J. (2011). The routing and re-routing of difficult knowledge: Social studies teachers encounter When the Levees Broke. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 39(3), 320–347. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2011.10473458>
- Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In S. Hall, D., Hobson, A., Love, and P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, Media, Language* (pp. 128–38). Hutchinson.
- Hall, S. (1982). The rediscovery of “ideology”: Return of the repressed in media studies. In M. Gurevitch, T. Bennett, J. Curran, & J. Woollacott (Eds.), *Culture, society and the media* (pp. 56-90). Methuen.
- Hall, S. (1985). Significance, representation, ideology: Althusser and the post-structuralist debates. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 2(1), 91–114.
- Hall, S. (1996). The West and the rest: Discourse and power. In S. Hall, D. Held, D. Hubert, & K. Thompson (Eds.), *Modernity: An introduction to modern societies* (pp. 184–224). Blackwell.
- Hanlon, J., Naudet, G., and Naudet, J. (Directors). (2002). *9/11*. CBS.
- Hess, D. E. (2009). *Controversy in the classroom: The democratic power of discussion*. Routledge.
- Hess, D. & Stoddard, J. (2007). 9/11 and terrorism: “The ultimate teachable moment” in textbooks and supplemental curricula. *Social Education*, 71(5), 231–236.
- Hess, D., Stoddard, J. & Murto, S. (2008). Examining the Treatment of 9/11 and Terrorism in High School Textbooks. In J. Bixby & J. Pace (Eds.) *Educating Democratic Citizens in Troubled Times: Qualitative Studies of Current Efforts* (pp. 192–226). SUNY Press.
- Journell, W. (2018). Terrorism. In D. G. Krutka, A. M. Whitlock, and M. E. Helmsing (Eds.), *Keywords in the social studies: Concepts & conversations* (pp. 217–229). Peter Lang.
- Kellner, D. (2004). 9/11, spectacles of terror, and media manipulation. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 1(1) 41–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405900410001674515>
- Lévesque, S. (2003). “Bin Laden is responsible; it was shown on tape”: Canadian high school students' historical understanding of terrorism, *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 31(2), 174–202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2003.10473221>
- Pillai, P. (1992). Rereading Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model, *Communication Theory*, 2 (3), 221–233. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.1992.tb00040.x>
- Ramji, R. (2005). From Navy Seals to *The Siege*: Getting to know the Muslim terrorist, Hollywood style. *Journal of Religion & Film*, 9(2), Article 6.
- Ramji, R. (2016). Examining the critical role American popular film continues to play in maintaining the Muslim terrorist image, Post 9/11. *Journal of Religion & Film*, 20(1), Article 4.
- Roose, K., (March 4, 2021). *What Is QAnon, the viral pro-Trump conspiracy theory?* The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/article/what-is-qanon.html>
- Saleem, M. M., & Thomas, M. K. (2011). The reporting of the September 11th terrorist attacks in American social studies textbooks: A Muslim perspective. *The High School Journal*, 95(1), 15–33.
- Schweber, S. (2006). Fundamentally 9/11: The fashioning of collective memory in a Christian school. *American Journal of Education*, 112(3), 392–417. <http://www.doi.org/10.1086/500714>
- Sorkin, A. (Producer) and Misiano, C. (Director). (2001, October 3). *The West Wing: Isaac and Ishmael* [Television Broadcast]. Warner Bros.

- Stahl, J. (September 6, 2011). *Where did 9/11 conspiracies come from?* Slate. [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/trutherism/2011/09/where\\_did\\_911\\_conspiracies\\_come\\_from.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/trutherism/2011/09/where_did_911_conspiracies_come_from.html)
- Stoddard, J. (2014). Teaching thoughtfully with and about film. *Social Education*, 78(5), 220–224.
- Stoddard, J., & Hess, D. (2008). *9/11 and the War on Terror in curricula and in state standards documents*. Tufts University: Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED536248.pdf>
- Stoddard, J., Hess, D., & Hammer, C. (2011). The challenges of writing “first draft history”: The evolution of the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath in school textbooks in the United States. In L. Yates & M. Grumet (Eds.), *2011 World Yearbook of Education: Curriculum in today’s world: Identities, politics, work, and knowledge*, (pp. 223–236). Routledge.
- Stoddard, J., Hess, D., & Henne, B., (2016). *9/11 and the War on Terror in curriculum and states standards documents data set*. University of Wisconsin – Madison. <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1793/79299>
- Stoddard, J. (September 1, 2019). *Teaching 9/11 and the war on terror: national survey of secondary teachers*. University of Wisconsin – Madison. <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1793/79305>
- van Kessel, C. (2017). A phenomenographic study of youth conceptualizations of evil: order-words and the politics of evil. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 40(4), 576–602.
- Wald, J. (Producer). (September 11, 2001). *The Today Show* [television program]. NBC.
- Wertsch, J. V. (2002). *Voices of collective remembering*. Cambridge University Press.
- Will, M. & Sawchuk, S. (January 6, 2021). *Insurgency at the U.S. Capitol: A dreaded, real-life lesson facing teachers*. Education Week. <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/insurgency-at-the-u-s-capitol-a-dreaded-real-life-lesson-facing-teachers/2021/01>
- Yoder, P. (2020). “He wants to get rid of all the Muslims”: Mexican American and Muslim students’ use of history regarding candidate Trump. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 48(3), 346–374. <https://www.doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2020.1773364>
- Zembylas, M. (2014). Theorizing “difficult knowledge” in the aftermath of the “affective turn”: Implications for curriculum and pedagogy in handling traumatic representations. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 44(3), 390–412. <http://www.doi.org/10.1111/curi.12051>