How People Learned About the September 11 Terrorist Attack and How It Affected Them. A Study in News Diffusion and Psychosocial Reactions in Germany

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1 Introduction

The attack on the New York World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, represents an event that no one could have expected. It surpassed every human imagination and could only be conceived of in one's wildest dreams or in science fiction (or in a computer game, as was found out later). It brought a shock to the nation and disrupted normal patterns of daily activity. For a while nobody knew whether it was just the beginning of even more deadly attacks on New York, the USA, or even the Western world. And it was also unknown initially from where the attack had started and what it meant: was it an attack by Islamic terrorists, the Russians, or another superpower?

The attack created a situation where everything seemed possible and where all people could be affected one way or the other, directly or indirectly. In this respect the event was much more alarming than extraordinary or shocking events of the past – such as the assassination of John F. Kennedy or the assassination attempt on Ronald Reagan. In both these events the nation was devastated because the president of the USA himself had been the target and the question was how this would affect the running of the nation. But in the case of September 11 the event looked much more dramatic, with a much broader impact and threat. The very basis of American life and economy had become the target of terror. Personal security could no longer be taken for granted by the average citizen, and everyone – not just politicians – seemed to represent a potential victim of terror.

What makes the event rather singular, furthermore, is the fact that the nation could follow – and even watch – the events as they were developing after the first attack live with mass media. When the attack occurred all media channels began focusing on the same events. Regular programming was interrupted and up-to-date information was transmitted as soon as it reached the journalists. Especially TV instantly took the lead. Shortly after the first tower was attacked,
TV – as well as radio – stations in the USA started continuous reporting and transmitted live pictures from the scene. Outside the United States, television stations followed quickly, often – as in Germany – by taking over ongoing U.S. programs, foremost CNN broadcasts. When the first airplane hit the World Trade Center it was 8:46 am in New York. In Germany it was 2:46 pm. The first reports and pictures, as shown by CNN, were already conveyed to the German audience a few minutes later. At about 2:53 pm the German TV station n-tv interrupted its program and informed the audience. Other stations followed quickly and started continuous reporting.

How fast did the news spread, in which way and with what kind of effect? Questions such as these have repeatedly been dealt with in communication research, focusing on disasters, accidents, crimes or political events (see e.g. Greenberg 1964a, b; Schenk 2007: 360ff.). A major point in this debate has been the question regarding which channel plays the dominant role in the process of news diffusion: is it the mass media or interpersonal communication? All too often, mass media and interpersonal channels were seen as opposites. And all too often they were dealt with as if the question of mass media vs. interpersonal channels is a matter of “yes” or “no” and not one of conditions under which the various channels gain or lose relevance or interact with each other (Reardon & Rogers 1988).

Most of the research on news diffusion was conducted in the USA. Only rarely have studies been done in other nations (e.g. Wober 1995; Cohen 2002; Vowe & Wolling 2003). Especially lacking is knowledge about the effects of extraordinary events that happened outside one’s own country: how does news diffusion take place in this case? Do events in foreign countries affect people at all and for how long? What is the role of the event, the country affected, and the relationship between one’s own country and the country in which the event took place? Apart from research on the assassination of Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme (Rosengren 1987; Kepplinger et al. 1987; Gantz & Tokinoya 1987), little is known and little has been done within a comparative framework.

The fact that so little is known has to do with the nature of the events: if an event occurs completely unexpectedly and out of the blue, then social research is hardly able to deal with it. In many cases – including the 9/11 terror attack – researchers in the academic field had to turn to nonrepresentative samples such as college students or convenience samples to collect data on news diffusion. Local or nationwide representative surveys have remained scarce. “Standby research” capabilities (Biderman 1966) that allow an immediate response on a professional basis with representative samples usually do not exist in university social science departments.