Theorizing Place and Space in Television
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Illustration 1: CNN's 9/11 coverage

Illustration 2: NBC's 9/11 coverage

Illustration 3: 2012 Aurora Theater shooting coverage

Illustration 4: ESPN's Boston Strong documentary about the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing

On 9/11, NBC and CNN respectively branded their coverage "Attack on America" and "America Under Attack." Following Columbine, Bill Clinton addressed cameras used a similar synecdoche, assuring the public that Littleton stood for the U.S. and promising victims that they had "the prayers of the American people." As these examples suggest, television coverage frequently articulates localized disasters as symbolically national events. Why is it that journalists and politicians frame the understanding and discussions of catastrophes this way? Why do viewers accept these constructs? And what might its effects be?

Benedict Anderson's notion of the nation as an "imagined community" is critical to understanding this phenomenon. In his model, the nation exists primarily because its citizens believe it does. Anderson notes the particular importance of the newspaper and other print media in the development of the modern nation-state. In this sense, the nation was virtual long before postmodernist theorists came to regard virtuality as a cultural dominant. More contemporary media have followed suit with broadcasting's physical boundedness, regulatory history, and tendency towards simultaneous transmission and reception playing important roles intensifying the nationalizing effects of mass media.

Jean Baudrillard and Slavoj Zizek cite 9/11 as a paradigmatic virtual moment because its power affecting everything from American consumer habits to foreign policy depended on its dissemination as images through media. It is no wonder then, that the imagined community and virtual event collude ideologically. Television and other media are always caught up in nationalism, but in the wake of catastrophes, these tendencies become even more pronounced. In fact, the understanding of an event as national is a significant factor in distinguishing it from everyday bad news. When a story is big enough to gain national coverage; when it affects people deemed to be "average Americans" (meaning those that resemble the demographics of journalists and high-ranking politicians), these stories tend to get the treatment that removes them from the realm of the local and puts them in the realm of the national.[1]

The desire to report and understand these events as national arises from a number of factors. At the broadest level, the habit of thinking ourselves part of a nation drives these

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[1] Space limitations prevent me from fully expanding on these observations, but comparing the responses to the 2012 theater shooting in Aurora, Colorado against widespread violence that summer in Chicago proves instructive. While the former was covered as an affectively-intense national phenomenon that drove discussions at the federal level, the latter was treated primarily as a local issue with relatively staid coverage even in local Chicago coverage.

tendencies. But there are other causes that make catastrophes more significant than everyday community-imagining. Our better selves are likely driven by empathy to overidentify with victims, virtually eliminating space as we imagine ourselves in their position. At the same time, coverage frequently exalts victims as heroes and saints, which may speak to our attention-hungry worse selves. That these are symbolically significant events may also drive people to want to claim a portion of that symbolic importance as witnesses. And as regards "witnessing", the clarity of the "flashbulb memory," where we clearly remember where we were when we first heard of Kennedy, 9/11, etc., might also affect one's sense of proximity to the event itself in that vivid memories might be more associated with physical co-presence at the event. Finally, the long-take, real-time coverage described by Mary Anne Doane might also feel more like one is witnessing unmediated events.

Media producers and critical trauma theorists alike seem to operate on the tacit assumption that it is an ethical good to speak of the local in national terms. Since I like to play contrarian and hope a critique of these assumptions might spawn discussion, I propose a few loaded questions to conclude. Considering the political fallout from 9/11 and the lack of effective political response following numerous mass shootings, what, if any, is the political benefit to these nationalizing discourses? If not, is there a way to transform these discourses into more useful political and social action? These rhetorical moves facilitate and result from distressing the audience. When is it ethical to distress audiences? I have gestured towards the notion that some forms of violence and some people's deaths are more likely to become nationalized than others. What kinds of racial, class, gender, sexual, or other politics come into play when making local disasters into national events?