



Discursive realities

Global media and September 11

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ABSTRACT: *One key issue in the study of mass communication culture is the way in which the audience is 'paedocratized' (Hartley, 1992) and continually (re)constructed. But as Ang's (1996) analysis of students' responses to the 1991 Gulf War coverage shows, dominant discourse can produce alternative discourses, often sparking a 'quiet revolt' against the purveyance of global media. Inspired by Ang, this paper is the result of research undertaken with 70 Mass Communication undergraduate students at Murdoch University on September 11, 2002 (first anniversary of the terror attacks on America). Students were asked to revisit their reactions following the collapse of the Twin Towers, to consider whether the coverage was 'media overkill' and to express their thoughts one year on. As students were already well-equipped with critical knowledge of the reach and power of global media by the time the survey was carried out, most responses reinforce the discursive struggles encountered by students trying to make sense of a 'global' event in a local context. Like Ang, many students were found to be resistant to a globalised media that draws them and holds them, as audiences, in complicity. This paper thus provides useful and important insights into how resistance and refusal become manifest in expressions of disinterest in and resentment of global media.*

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Since the terrorist attacks in America on 11 September 2001 (9/11), much has been made of the dreamlike cinematic effect of television images showing the destruction of US structures, especially those relating to the collapse of the World Trade Center Twin Towers in New York (Osborne, 2003, p. 5). All television

viewing audiences would recall viewing footage of the dramatic collapse repeatedly in the days and weeks following 9/11. Expectedly, television channels and networks around the world rapidly seized the opportunity to provide the best coverage possible on the event, even though this meant that global news media organisations such as the USA's CNN and Fox News were being privileged. The overwhelming media coverage of the event could perhaps be described as a media frenzy at best, and a media overkill at worst. Correspondingly, medical experts began warning people that television replays of 9/11 were a 'health hazard' due to the many vivid and disturbing images of hijacked planes slamming into the Twin Towers, of people jumping or falling from buildings, and the eventual collapse of the towers (*The Straits Times Interactive*, 2002). As Savio (2002) points out most cogently:

The attacks themselves were highly charged with a 'message' conveying 'information' with a strong impact on the world. Not two, but thousands of towers fell over and over again on every network. (p. 17)

There are different ways of reading the effects of the hazardous images of 9/11 on media audiences. One could adopt Hartley's description of the television audience as being 'paedocratized', that is to say, being treated as children and force-fed a diet of programs (Hartley, 1992, p. 108). In this case, the programs are news reports and analyses of possibly the most mediated catastrophe the world has witnessed. At the same time, audiences are being continually (re)imagined and (re)constructed even as the images recur on television screens around the world, a point Ang (1996) alludes to several times in her book *Living Room Wars*, where she analyses the role of media audiences in an increasingly postmodern world (see also Ang, 1991).

In chapter 9 of her 1996 book, Ang describes a research project she carried out with her then-students at the University of Amsterdam about their televisual experiences with CNN's media coverage of the war two weeks after the launch of Operation Desert Storm—or Gulf War 1, as it is now commonly referred to—in January 1991. According to Ang, her students reacted in a consistent manner. These media studies students began with 'an obsessive fascination' with minute-to-minute real-time reports and images on CNN, motivated by a desire to stay involved (Ang, 1996, p. 151). CNN's on-the spot reporting of the world's first 'real-time' war undoubtedly changed the landscape of global media, sparking a deep hunger for instantaneous

news and information. Media theorists and critics today refer to such instantaneous televisual desires and production outcomes as the 'CNN effect' (Thussu, 2000, pp. 156–160). Yet Ang observes that, within a week, this feeling of participation becomes superseded by a desire for detachment, indifference, even resentment about the excessiveness and over-emphases on war. As Ang summarises:

The initial interest gave way to a more routine form of (dis)engagement. In other words, what gradually but inevitably occurred was a kind of 'resistance' against the imposed complicity created by the news media, a quiet revolt against the position of well-informed powerlessness induced by the media's insistence on keeping us continuously posted. [...] For most of them, the war remained a limited media reality which did not succeed in totally encroaching on the intimate texture of their local, everyday concerns. (1996, p. 151)

This mode of concomitant engagement and disengagement creates what we refer to as 'discursive realities' in this paper, a condition that privileges the 'real' as presented in global media while actively interrogating its truth value.

Transplanting Ang's observations onto the current era of globalisation, marked by greater technological flows and counter-flows (including anti-globalisation movements), we argue in this paper that dominant discourses in contemporary times have a greater propensity to produce alternative discourses, often sparking a 'quiet revolt' against the purveyance of global media. Inspired by Ang's encounter with her students, this paper is the result of a survey research undertaken with 70 undergraduate students at Murdoch University, Australia on September 11, 2002 (first anniversary of the terrorist attacks). Students in a Mass Communication class were asked to revisit their reactions following the collapse of the Twin Towers, to consider whether the coverage was 'media overkill', and to express their thoughts one year on.

As students enrolled in a Mass Communication core unit that deals with issues of globalisation, global media, and new media technologies, most were already well-equipped with critical knowledge of the reach and power of global media by the time the survey was carried out. As a result, most responses were unsurprising, though nonetheless significant in drawing our attention to the discursive realities of global media and 9/11. As Ang had uncovered, we found that many students

were resistant to a global(ised) media that draws them into a 'global' event like 9/11 and holds them, as audiences, in 'imposed complicity' (Ang, 1996, p. 151). As a commentary cum report on the survey, this paper provides useful and important insights into how audience resistance and refusal become manifest in expressions of disinterest in and resentment of global media.

A note on research methodology

Three questions were posed to students at the start of the lecture on 11 September 2002:

1. Flashback to September 11 or 12, 2001. What was your first reaction to September 11, 2001, upon your first TV viewing of the Twin Towers collapse?
2. Did you think that the subsequent media reports were 'media overkill'?
3. What are your thoughts today as the world commemorates one year since September 11? Have they changed?

Although these questions were intended to evoke the swiftest of replies, so that students would provide a genuine 'first-thought' response, students were given about five minutes to collect their thoughts before a further fifteen minutes to transcribe their responses onto a survey sheet. As Berger (2000, p. 194) advises, open-ended surveys allow respondents to construct their answers in writing, thus enabling closer analyses by the researchers.

This study sought to emulate Ang's (1996) experiment in that we were keen to look for patterns in the way students engaged with global and mediated events, and were also interested in the ways in which students expressed their engagement with media reportage. For this reason, it is a study of meaning-making practices employed by these students in order to speak within a discourse centred on the media and 9/11. To be sure, the study does not discuss media reportage in itself. We do not presume to be able to speak of the media industry in totality, nor do we presume to capture the plethora of meanings people make of the deluge of images and commentaries that accompanied the events of September 11. Our research is premised on what we perceive to be a 'safe' assumption: that our Mass Communication students saw, read, and listened to a variety of commercial and non-commercial, as well as formal and informal, media that commentated on the events of 9/11'.

The study also serves a dual purpose in allowing us as teachers of mass communication (and media globalisation) to cast a wide net over our students in order to gather a larger number of speakers into our discussions on mass communication vis-à-vis a global media event. Although tutorials and an online discussion forum (on WebCT) provide space for students to discuss globalisation, global media, and other issues raised in the unit, these spaces are predominantly 'self-selected responses', usually reflecting the opinions of those who are more vociferous and able to speak within discourses governed by prescribed University codes and practices. Since the majority of the students do not participate in these practices, the responses from this survey—while somewhat limited in scope—represent a larger field of articulation from our students. For instance, questions 1 and 3 are deliberately open-ended and broad, designed to elicit answers that are similarly open and broad. Question 2, on the other hand, leads the respondent into an either/or response, and as such, is designed to draw polarised opinions. We realise that students are speaking in retrospect and that reactions to the event were no doubt more complex at the time than perhaps these responses do or can describe. However, it is important to reiterate that our focus is on the way respondents mediate their experiences, and the way they are articulated one year on.

In the sections that follow, we provide a summary of the responses to the three questions. In addition, we offer our critical comments on how Mass Communication students would respond to a major event or crisis that demands both engagement and complicity versus disengagement and criticality simultaneously.

Question 1: Flashback to September 11 or 12, 2001. What was your first reaction to September 11, 2001, upon your first TV viewing of the Twin Towers collapse?

If the primary question to be answered with regard to the production of news is 'What will concern the audience most?', then the second question must be 'Who is the audience?'. To answer this question is to assume what Ang calls a 'taxonomic collective', that is, an audience capable of being delineated and classified according to the degree of their concern, and that there is a consensus among this audience or at least a majority rule (Ang, 1991, chapter 3). The consensus of this collective is critical to news producers when deciding what stories to air, in what order, and when to air them. We presume that these decisions are made with some deliberation not just at management-

level meetings but also on a day-to-day editorial level. Indeed, these decisions can be instantaneous. Consider, for example, the decision of Channel Nine in Australia to finish airing the US Emmy award-winning program *The West Wing* before commencing coverage of the World Trade Center attacks (Dodd, 2001). Here the presumption no doubt took place on a micro scale. It is obvious that the decision-makers at Channel Nine were fully aware of the forthcoming impact of the 9/11 reports and images that were soon to go on air. After all, to be uninterested in the news headlines is to position oneself—and one's self—outside the 'consensus' of concern that defines a community. Consider then the power of the story that occupies the concern of a community *in toto* and the 'discursive reality' that it instills in media consumers.

September 11 coverage ran uninterrupted for approximately twenty-four hours on all free-to-air television channels in Australia (see Jackson, 2002). The repetition of footage on TV, photographs in the newspapers, and interviews being played over and over in the broadcast media produced a sustained and weighted environment of critical information, simultaneously reacting to and reinforcing the audience's need to know (Savio, 2002). Ang's (1996) description of the Gulf War coverage on CNN in 1991 is similar. She describes the initial reaction of her students to the Gulf War coverage as 'a haunting sense of involvement' (Ang, 1996, p. 151). This phrase readily characterises the initial reactions described by the students in answer to the first question. The majority mention shock and disbelief, while many mentioned the seeming unreality of the news: a momentary inability to accept the images as 'real'. Common reactions were as follows:

This can't be real.

America is under attack? What? This can't be.

Disbelief, would never have expected something that big to happen. Immediately thought it would be the most shocking news event to happen in my lifetime.

I don't think I truly understood the magnitude of the event.

Shock, disbelief, a rather strange notion of unreality.

Speechless, shocked.

Oh my god!! (double exclamations intended)

Shock. Denial. Could not believe that it is real. Thought that it was a hoax.

Shock—then I thought this was the beginning of WWII.

I was in a state of shock, almost in tears, thinking about all these people who actually were losing their lives.

I could not believe the picture of the Twin Towers crashing. I was shocked by the pictures.

Sadness, disbelief, shock, fear, slight morbid fascination.

The above responses draw our attention to the potentiality and potency of (former) CNN Chief Ted Turner's vision of a monolithic global audience via his 'blanket-the-globe' strategy (Thussu, 2000, p. 156). Since the 1991 Gulf War, no event had the same 'simultaneously happening' depth as 9/11, literally screened in millions of homes around the world. The shock, disbelief, and fear unite the audience in a common and uniform reaction.

The ways in which audiences are quickly caught up by the event reiterates Ang's reference to an 'imposed complicity created by the news media', a positioning of the audience by the media as participants in global events via a discourse that reinforces, as well as responds to, their desire to remain informed (Ang, 1996, p. 151). Reactions of shock, disbelief, fear and rhetorical 'speechlessness' are the reactions of heavily involved subjects. The incredible empathy the students feel and the expression of somewhat irrational fears—such as the student who fears the advent of World War III—demonstrate a sense of the self as taking part in the event, being affected directly and personally. It is not surprising then that many other students included their family and friends—both within and outside Australia—in their responses:

Are my family back in Singapore safe?

(My reaction) turned immediately to friends in NY at the time.

Felt a great love and need for my family.

I remember calling home and telling my mum I don't want to die in Australia.

Worried about my fiancé who's in the Australian Navy and on deployment in the Gulf at the time.

Worried—my brother and father were at different parts of America during that time.

Students reiterated the complicity and involvement assumed by the news media. They emphasised their connectivity to people in other parts of the world unhampered by geo-political boundaries, buying unproblematically into the very socio-cultural foundation of globalisation as a 'dense web of cross-border relationships' (AT Kearney Inc., 2002, p. 40). In much the same way, one student gave this response that emphasises the more personal sense of involvement: 'I thought, I hope I don't have to go to war'. The student in this circumstance projects into the future and imagines an unwilling but inevitable heightening of involvement in what was to become known as the 'war against terror'. In this case, the effects of 9/11 extended into 'after-effects', moving from passive complicity to complicity by/with actions. The effect of global media coverage thus succeeds in 'totally encroaching on the intimate texture' of their everyday concerns (Ang, 1996, p. 151). Indeed, to feel involved is to bring the event home, to imagine it as happening to one's friends, family—and to oneself. The obvious next step was then to imagine the consequences of this involvement: going to war, being conscripted, however remote this might actually be.

Question 2: Did you think that the subsequent media reports were 'media overkill'?

Overkill: the use of more resources or energy than is necessary to achieve one's aim.

(The Macquarie Concise Dictionary, 1998, p. 820)

While there are those who see the media as playing a traditionally important role in informing the public of events and information that matter, many respondents felt the coverage was excessive. By the same token, there were several students who did not feel that the media coverage was 'overkill':

Not at all. There was a huge demand for information pertaining to the events in New York and Washington.

No. People around the globe should know about this incident.

Some of the images were very sad, yet it helped to put a thought in everyone's mind about what is going on.

Coming from CNN, which is American, the emphasis is understandable.

The reports during the initial incident were important.

It was kind of imperative to show the images.

Nevertheless, many of the students who recognised the obligation of the media to show 'news' (in its raw form) felt that the amount of news time devoted to the incident was excessive. This could be attributed to the directive nature of our question, intended on the one hand to draw the obvious answers, but also to invoke criticality among our students on the other. Nevertheless, as expected, the following comments came from students who felt the media coverage to be 'overkill':

There was just no way of escape.

People die all over the world for various reasons. Natural disasters, terrorism, cruel dictatorships, civil and other wars, starvation, or drought. Why the big fuss over the US?

Media ruined the event and made such a big deal about it all. There was WAY too much coverage (emphasis in original).

It started to feel like a preview to an upcoming blockbuster Hollywood movie.

By showing the event all over, what good does that do to us, except for media profit[?]

They were cashing in on the misery, making it harder for affected people.

They didn't report anything new. Seemed to glorify or make it more 'tabloid-y', made it cheap, pointless hype.

I started thinking about the one million people that Suharto killed or the genocide by Pol Pot—those atrocities did not even warrant front page news in The New York Times.

What emerges distinctly here is a debate about the role of the media. This is not surprising, given that these are theoretically informed Mass Communication students. It is interesting, however, to examine the role this discussion plays in the re-imagining of the self with reference to the presumption of consensus in the media. Whether the media portrays an unadulterated 'truth' remains a highly discursive matter.

There are students who feel that the role of the media is to inform, to keep the public notified. These students saw the extent of the coverage as 'necessary' to maintain a degree of objectivity, a kind of 'it's not pretty but it needs to be told' attitude towards the story. Students who felt the media coverage was 'overkill' made references to the lack of 'change' in events, despite the continuous coverage. As Jackson puts it, while many viewers kept watching their screens, 'a dearth of fresh vision soon put what footage there was into a grisly loop: planes smashing, bodies falling, towers toppling, round and round, from various angles', hence the feeling of media 'overkill' (Jackson, 2002, p. 4). Many students made similar recollections, with some even blanching at the repetitive images:

The reporters [were] repeating themselves all the time. No one had any fresh insight into the matter.

They didn't report anything new.

The public wanted information and the thing was, the same news kept on repeating.

The repeated videos were a little overdone.

Too much repetition of the crash footage.

[The] repetition of horror images has desensitised my feelings toward 9/11.

*Seeing the plane crash into the tower over and over again!!
Erggh!!*

The pictures are impactful enough to haunt you for the rest of your life! Must they still rub it in?

They kept repeating and flashing the same image over and over again. They kept repeating the collapsing of the Twin Towers and the images of the plane crashes.

They kept showing the plane crash into the towers over and over again for about three days straight.

While the above students clearly reflect on the off-putting nature of the constancy of the images, it is more than disinterest that characterises their responses. Their comments reflect annoyance bordering on resentment toward the lack of change. It appears that these students experienced feelings of futility as the media attempts to presume a

consensual complicity on the part of television audiences. Indeed, the students become increasingly aware of their 'well-informed powerlessness' as their ability to effect change in whatever measure was inversely proportional to the degree of involvement they felt (Ang, 1996, p. 151).

Repeated airing of the event—especially the global 'live' broadcast of the second plane spearing into the south tower—serves to invite the audience back to that initial moment of consensual complicity when the sense of involvement of the audience was at its height. The mediated omnipresence of these images still elicits a sense of involvement and strong attachment in most of us. However, as it becomes clear that this implicated involvement results in a complete lack of change, we begin to question the point of this reiterated complicity. Such questionings are indeed part and parcel of the discursive politics of television viewing. After all, as Ang suggests:

We can switch off the television set, but as its images pervade the texture of our everyday worlds, the distinction between media reality and social reality becomes blurred. What needs to be addressed, then, is the complicated relationship between global media and local meanings, their intricate interconnections as well as disjunctions. (1996, p. 152)

With these thoughts in mind, it is also possible to understand why our students have unwittingly posed questions on the role of the media in a situation like 9/11. Instead of stating their perceptions of the media coverage of 9/11, most students adopted a somewhat philosophical stance, pondering on what a responsible media should have done.

The third set of responses reflects a growing discontentment with what the respondents perceive as the Americanisation of the global media. A few students went to the extent of making comparisons with events of similar magnitude (e.g., Hiroshima, Cambodia's Pol Pot regime, New Guinea's Tsunami, etc.), with the obvious intention of making the point that 9/11 received much attention primarily because it happened in the United States of America. Other like comments include:

We still hear about it now. If the event happened anywhere else it would be ignored.

I think the whole situation was over publicised and that horrible things happen in other parts of the world also, which are ignored or forgotten quickly.

All incidents or events happening in the US are always get[ting] huge coverage on media.

The whole issue became one of a farce and a giant 'mega-bias' towards one nation.

There are many other events that also affected the world which [the] media didn't take into account.

There were also many who drew upon the notion of media as corporate big business and argued that the constant coverage was an act of 'cashing in' (Croteau & Hoynes, 2001). The implied statement about the media here is that it exploits the sense of involvement that audiences feel—again, the constant return to the image of the plane flying into the buildings (see Savio, 2002)—which equates to a profit imperative:

By showing the event all over, what good does that do to us except for media profit.

[The global media] were cashing in on the misery, making it harder for affected people.

The main goal within the media was to maximise audience and profit.

It was [the] commercialisation of September 11.

The statements made are not necessarily justified and arguments can certainly be raised to rebut some of the presumptions made about the media here. But read collectively, a powerful debate about the role of the media in forming discursive realities emerges from these statements. Such reasoning suggests that the students hold an idealised version—and vision—of the news media, namely its ethical obligation to present unbiased and pertinent information. Quite simply, they judge it by its conformity to this ideal. A small number of students actually held up alternative news outlets such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) news outlet and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) as better examples of coverage, indicating the possibility that this 'ideal' could be realised. The observations made by our students may have strong elements of rationality, but in the final analysis, Ang's (1996) observation that the more students become aware of the powerlessness of information, the more they resent its imposition holds true. This question of 'media overkill' has thrown much light on the fact that global media forces have a limited 'effectivity in particular

locales' (Ang, 1996, p. 153), the extent to which is highly debatable and remains open for further interrogation.

Question 3: What are your thoughts today as the world commemorates one year since September 11? Have they changed?

This question elicited reactions that were more condemning and reactionary than the previous two questions. In the responses to this question, we see anger, disillusionment, and aggravation, especially with regard to the political, economic, cultural, and media domination of the world by America. Many of the statements were reactionary, and at times incendiary:

George Bush is an idiot.

America is using this tragedy to serve their own political and economic purpose.

It's sad. But Americans always make a big deal of things. They deserved what happened, in a way.

At first it was a terrible thing but now it seems as if the US is using this as a way to boost their image in the world as the 'good guys'.

[I] think the point of the terrorist attacks has been missed. [They] served only to rejuvenate American patriotism on this the newly named 'patriot day'.

I'm sick of it. America hasn't changed and it's still too full of itself.

I will not be drawn into pro-American overkill.

The US is still as proud as ever.

The students position themselves antagonistically against the United States or 'America'. 'America' becomes appropriated as the mastermind of this 'imposed complicity' that they have grown to resent. There are two noteworthy points here. First, the focus of the resentment is on 'America', not the local media that chose to air the material constantly, and are the ones presuming the local audiences' 'need to know'. In this instance, the media—seen as global in format and appearance—equals America. Second, the subject of this resentment and anger is

a totalised entity: 'America', 'the US' and/or 'Americans', rather than 'American foreign policy' or 'the American media'. Students couch their antagonism in rhetoric that deprives the geopolitical state of the USA and its people of complexity or heterogeneity, buying into a novel wave of anti-Americanism that surfaced from early 2002. Indeed, during this time, several books written by public intellectuals on the subject of anti-Americanism surfaced in bookshops around the world².

The issues are related. Students in this particular Mass Communication course are given up-to-date and fairly in-depth instructions on the world of media ownership. In other words, they are made aware of the vast amount of media production that is owned, controlled, or happening in the USA. It follows that they are trained to 'read into' the key issues of a 'watershed' media event that takes place on American soil. They question its importance to the 'local' in the context of 'media-overkill', suggesting that the extent of media coverage is unnecessary. As Tunstall (1977) puts it, 'the media are American' and privilege American stories, hence the coverage on Australian television is excessive, irrelevant, and, therefore, evidence of the dominance of the American media as a cultural product. Its power is absolute and its impact on the 'weaker' Australian media is therefore unassailable.

The discursive reality is one where the cultural imperialism thesis applies. The cultural imperialism thesis is analysed in the unit and our students are required to read Tomlinson's explanation of the thesis (Tomlinson, 1991, 1997). Students see the dominance of the images from America on their television screens and readily apply the cultural imperialism thesis: the dominance of one culture is to the detriment of another, resulting in the loss of the local and a loss of diversity. However simplistic, the cultural imperialism thesis is an attractive theory as it explains (away) the loss of one's identity, whether real or imagined. Tomlinson (1997, p. 121) argues that it has been subjected to Foucault's 'procedures of rarefaction' in that it thins out the 'dense mass' of the discursive reality of cultural interaction. It regulates the discourse and makes it subject to boundaries and definitions according to a legitimised knowledge. The 'event' of 9/11, in which we include the media coverage and the multitude of meanings made in layers after layers of discursive realities that grew up around the event, is a momentarily designated example of the 'events' of social, political, and cultural interaction. To undertake to understand 9/11 as a mediated socio-cultural event is to interrogate at a micro-level the macro event of global cultural interaction.

For students, as for many of us, to speak is to rarefy. To engage with the discourse at any level is therefore to seek boundaries and definitions within which to be heard. In other words, students see our survey on 9/11 as their opportunity to articulate and apply their newly acquired knowledge of global media and accompanying discourses of globalisation, especially the cultural imperialism thesis. In seeking to articulate an essence of their emotional responses to September 11, our students find the 'cultural imperialism' argument convenient, effectively simple, mercifully utilitarian, and academically canonised. In a mass of meaning, these students are attracted to the simplicity of cultural—and indeed, media—imperialism. We suspect this is also true of all media audiences, though its authentication must be the subject of another study.

Buck-Morss (2002) outlines a 'complex meaning, double-vision' in the discourses existing in the aftermath of September 11. The spectre of Timothy McVeigh looms as the 'perfect soldier', whose act of terrorism 'paralleled that of September 11' (Buck-Morse, 2002, p. 4). She argues that, in order to understand this complexity, the public must be capable of seeing in 9/11 the 'US schools of America together with the al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan', as well as a comparison with September 11, 1973, when the US supported criminal acts and mass killings as part of the military coup of Chile. Likewise, from the responses received, we note how students struggle with connectivity between international political relations and a tragic event that killed those who were not necessarily embroiled in any political relations. Students jotted down comments such as:

[I feel] sadness for the people of America but I think too many stories and programs are being produced for this day just because it's America. Eastern countries go through this everyday and I don't think it's fair.

I think it is sad to have lost so many innocent people, but America's attempt to control the world has brought it on themselves.

I'm more critical of the whole thing, not that I don't feel compassion for the victims but critical of the media coverage as it hypes up the audience.

It is noteworthy to recall Foucault's (1972) assertion that oppositional discourses occupy the same discursive space. The corollary is that to peak against the dominance of American images on 'other' television screens is ironically to take part in the practice of cultural imperialism.

One year after the event, these students felt the need to assert their identity as outside the assumed consensus, to resist the repetition of the 'imposed complicity' (Ang, 1996, p. 151). They express feelings of detachment and irritation with the event:

*I feel less afraid, less hyped-up about the whole incidence [sic].
I'm more concerned with my own problems.*

*It is sad for those it happened to, their families and friends but
really I think the rest of us should just get over it.*

I personally think the entire incident should be put to rest.

Other people in the world are suffering too.

*I think we should move forward and try to keep this tragedy
behind us.*

*Why do they bother going into the event again, when it is
already so highly broadcast on the day itself? Just because it is
the US?*

One student even highlighted their refusal to participate in the first anniversary commemorative ritual for 9/11—driving with car headlights on during the day—as a protest against global complicity. Such a protest exemplifies Ang's 'quiet revolt against the position of well-informed powerlessness' (Ang, 1996, p. 151)³.

Conclusion

With reference to the political rhetoric espoused by the US government immediately after 9/11, Buck-Morss notes that 'when hegemony is under siege it does not tolerate a complexity of meaning' (2002, p. 4). Mass Communication students are often taught to question political rhetoric and to look for complexities and contradictions. Yet it is difficult to counter political rhetoric with an argument of complexity derived from theoretical media texts. In the explosion of meanings that erupted after 9/11, it is difficult to argue that students do not recognise a complexity of meanings. Instead, more often than not, students lack the discursive framework in which to express this complexity and instead look to accessible discourses (the cultural imperialism thesis, for example) in order to speak on the subject.

The dominant discursive realities in which 9/11 takes place—the political, the economic, and, indeed, the cultural—are volatile and aggressive realities where the mechanisms of power are defined by

action and reaction, force and resistance to force. We seek to draw these responses from our students within these discursive spaces, but are conscious that to do so is to be in danger of once again rarefying the dense mass of what can be said about these responses. However, locating these responses within 'the system of enunciability' of that which is said, how it comes to be said, and the event of saying—as represented in Foucault's notion of the 'archive'—provides an illustration of the limits of this discourse (Foucault, 1972, p. 146). Mass Communication students are in the position of the 'well-informed' when it comes to an event like 9/11. They are bombarded with discourse—with knowledge, images, theories, and definitions—and become embroiled in a complex web of meaning-making and reaction. In an academic environment, they are not only expected to make meaning of the event, but to express meanings made. The result is an attempt to grapple with complexities, and an adherence to a reductionist discourse that is workable and valid(ated). They do so in recognition of their own powerlessness in such a situation. They react as a disempowered consumer attempting to (re)claim power, seeking to maintain control over their cultural and political environment by resisting the 'imposed complicity' of the media and seeking to identify themselves as uniquely 'other'.

Just as mass communication and global media will continue to re-define itself post-9/11, the event of 9/11—as well as aftermath events including the post-war rebuilding of Iraq—will continue to be examined and debated (see Savio, 2002; Jackson, 2002; and Murphy, 2002). As Osborne (2003) puts it in no uncertain terms, 'the events of September 11 are still happening' (p. 11).

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Notes

1. One limitation of this study is the absence of resources or space to examine the precise medium (or media) that students had used to obtain their information on 9/11. While we acknowledge that a larger

and more detailed separate study would be necessary to obtain such data, it needs to be made clear that our intention is to keep the scope of our study sufficiently small so that it can inform future teaching of the unit 'Mass Communication II'.

2. See, for instance, Chomsky (2001), Sardar and Davies (2002), and Baudrillard (2002). See also Green's (2003) review article on recent books about the politics of September 11.

3. It is worth noting that, in this question, we specifically referred to 9/11 as a global event by saying that 'the world commemorates...', thereby reinforcing students' feelings of forced complicity in the understanding of 9/11 as a 'globalised' world event. Students' responses have both reiterated and refuted our deliberate reference to perceptions of 9/11 vis-à-vis globalisation.

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