

Reporting a Tragedy: How the Media has Handled September 11 in the Past Year

By Robert Trishman, *Capital Times* Staff Writer



A year after September 11th, we have seen many reflections and memorials concerning the events of that day. Thursday, September 12, in the Morrison Gallery of the Penn

State Harrisburg Library, members of a panel discussed how the media (both national and international) handled the tragedy and what its role is in times of crisis.

"We saw the best and worst of the news media on 9/11," said Tim Riggs, former Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge's press secretary at the time of the attacks. He pointed out that the positives outweighed the negatives.

He added that news anchormen Tom Brokaw, Peter Jennings, and Dan Rather showed great stamina and dedication in keeping viewers informed and said, "they were heroic in their own way." Riggs went

on to say that the circumstances were evidence of the danger that reporters and photographers face in covering such events. Riggs also said that this showed what journalism is like today and will be like in the future. "There is no deadline anymore," he said. "In a time of crisis you need 24-hour instant reporting."

Juraj Kittler, a native Czechoslovakian journalist, talked about the European press and demonstrated how it reflected European attitudes toward the tragedy and the United States. He was surprised to see a lot of pro-American patriotism in France following the tragedy, but said that a few months later a French newspaper carried the headline "Are We All Americans?" which showed a reluctance to be associated with the U.S.

Kittler also said that a Belgian paper called the United States "helpless" and "a failure" because air strikes and raids on Afghanistan did not capture Osama bin Laden.

PSH communications professor, Eton Churchill, said, "We've changed from telling stories to presenting participation in stories." He said that we no longer tell, but we show. An example he used was during the Gulf War how cameras were placed on bombs and we saw images of the targets in Iraq that the bombs were headed towards. Churchill also said that reporters were limited in the kind of stories they could tell. The public (and the press) wanted certain categories of stories dealing with 9/11. Those were testimonials or "Where were you?" stories, victim stories, hero stories, and survivor stories.

All agreed that the media had one of the most important roles in the tragedy: keeping the public informed. This was evident in one comment that said the people watching CNN at home knew more of what was going on than did the firefighters in the World Trade Center.

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