

AMERICA UNDER ATTACK

# TV anchors are restrained, while Americans are fixated by reports of "orgy of terrorism"

BY GAIL PENNINGTON  
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Around the dial, ordinary television went dark on Tuesday as soap operas, talk shows and music videos gave way to continuous coverage of terrorist attacks in New York and Washington.

Morning shows were in progress on NBC, CBS and ABC when the first of two airplanes struck the World Trade Center

News Channel and CNN, with anchors Dick Ford and Mandy Murphey on hand beginning at midday. KPLR (Channel 11) picked up CNN.

On cable, news networks spread their reach throughout their corporate families, including channels that don't normally cover news.

TBS and TNN dropped regular programming in favor of a CNN feed (all are owned by AOL/

Time-Warner). Fox Sports Net and FX carried sister network Fox News Channel.

Disney-owned sports stations ESPN and ESPN2 both picked up ABC, also owned by Disney. Music channels MTV and VH1 dropped their regular lineups for coverage from CBS News (the link is owner Viacom).

Even shopping channels reacted. ShopNBC (formerly ValueVision) picked up MSNBC, and

QVC simply went dark, urging viewers to "turn to your TV news channel." The announcement alternated with a graphic providing the phone number of the American Red Cross for blood donations.

Attention had shifted by late afternoon to responsibility and retaliation. Speculation also reared its head, recalling what Rather had said earlier: "Inevitably, some first reports will be wrong."

early Tuesday. Stunned viewers and anchors watched together, live, shortly after 8 a.m. as a second plane crashed into the center's other tower.

From then on, the news

— and especially the pictures — only got worse, as a third attack hit the Pentagon and the damaged World Trade Center towers collapsed, one after the other. "We're watching, every person desperate to stop this tape and go and do something," ABC's Diane Sawyer said as a video of the collapse played again and again.

Both broadcast and cable networks called on all their resources to cover what CBS' Dan Rather called "a well-orchestrated orgy of terrorism" and Americans, gathered around TVs in their offices or frozen on their living room couches, remained fixated.

And if viewers did feel helpless, they never felt far away from the action as reporters on the scene, sometimes visibly shaken, related their own dramatic stories of the event.

Standing amid dust and destruction 10 blocks from the World Trade Center, NBC's Pat Dawson shook his head and called the scene "very, very difficult to describe without sounding melodramatic." On CBS, correspondent Mika Brzezinski coughed as she attempted to talk. Ashleigh Banfield of MSNBC choked out a story of being showered with debris. CNBC's Ron Insana, his hair and jacket covered with gray ash, described diving into a parked car and gasping for breath as the towers collapsed and the air turned dark with dust.

Since the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, when broadcast news first came into its own, television has provided not just information but also collective comfort in times of national tragedy. Comfort was hard to come by on Tuesday, but even as the magnitude of the disaster became clear, anchors clearly strained to avoid feeding a national panic.

Remembering how many mistakes were made in the early coverage of the Oklahoma City bombing, which was first attributed incorrectly to Arab terrorists, all the networks also seemed careful to avoid jumping to conclusions about the origin of Tuesday's attack — even after President George Bush appeared briefly on TV promising retaliation. "We'll do the best we can to separate fact from rumors and speculation," Rather promised.

Jennings apologized for even mentioning that a passenger jet might have been hijacked before receiving confirmation from the airline.

Rather emphasized that "the word of the day is steady, steady," adding that "the whole city is not in smoke and flames, not by a long shot." As Fox News Channel showed evacuations in lower Manhattan, Brit Hume said, "Although the scene you are watching may appear chaotic, it is important to remember there is a government plan in place."

But a picture outweighs a thousand comforting words, and on Tuesday, TV did what it does best, made every American an eyewitness to a scene that NBC's Katie Couric called "horrific, incredible, not to be believed."

And the pictures were everywhere.

NBC, CBS and ABC stayed live throughout the day, with St. Louis stations adding local coverage beginning shortly before noon. Full anchor and reporting teams were called in, including Dan Gray and Deanne Lane on KSDK (Channel 5), Larry Connors and Julius Hunter on KMOV (Channel 4) and Rick Edlund on KDNL (Channel 30).

Affiliated with Fox, which does not have a major network news division, KTVI (Channel 2) switched among local coverage and feeds from cable partner Fox



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