

THE CHANGING FACE OF JOURNALISM

There is no denying September 11, 2001 forever changed the world. The events of that fateful day transformed each of us in our mind and in our soul. Our perception of the news we read in print and see in video is also different. So, too are the ways journalists cover news stories and late breaking news events.

The effects in the communications business have been sobering. There appears to be more restraint by journalists to keep from jumping to conclusions. They are eager to root out more facts before they are quick to connect the dots. This hunger for truth has generated a deeper need to know what is going on and to question the accuracy of information and the reliability of sources.

Evidence of journalists being more cautious was evident November 12, 2001. Two months after the World Trade Center disaster, American Airlines Flight 587 crashed in New York, killing more than 200 people bound for the Dominican Republic. Commenting on the coverage, USA Today said of journalists:

You could hear it in their voice—a mix of anguish and resignation, built on the fear that the crash shortly after takeoff from New York’s JFK International Airport was more than just a terrible accident. Odds are, ABC’s Peter Jennings was correct when he said most of us had the same reaction to the news: “Oh, my God, it may have happened again.”

While no one leapt to a terrorism conclusion, the possibility was unavoidable. That in itself was news: As Katie Couric pointed out on NBC’s Today Show, the very idea that we were considering terrorism as an explanation, rather than assuming the crash was caused by mechanical failure, marked a change for many of us—yet another cultural shift brought on by the events of September 11.

On that day in November, journalists seemed to go to great lengths to assure the public every piece of information was being examined and re-examined, and they were going to great lengths not to speculate on a possible cause without the proper facts. In these difficult times, reporters seemed to do what they could to calm the public.

Today, every facet of news coverage, from local to international stories, has changed. Journalists appear to be more sympathetic to those who have been injured or victimized. In the first part of 2001, it was obvious an economic downturn was coming and there was some evidence with businesses laying off employees. Journalists spoke of numbers. Now, they speak of names. They chronicle the financial impact of people who have been laid off and how they will survive their misfortune.

In the continuing coverage of the Enron collapse, for example, journalists and United States Congressional members have wondered aloud, “How could this happen, how did it happen and how can this be stopped from happening to another giant corporation in the future?” Journalists contrast the living conditions of the once mighty managers to the current situations of the rank and file, visiting laid off employees in their homes.

The main players in the Enron debacle have spoken little, if at all, about their involvement in the demise of a once powerful corporation. Their silence has, in fact, generated more speculation of who and what was responsible for the quick fall from grace. Not just among the public, but the employees. Former employees speak of “feeling hurt” at the lack of openness and speak without reservation about how they, their families, and their communities have been affected. One ex-employee said, “I just wanted to hear an apology.”

Companies and industries are learning that citizens want things and ideas they can trust. If a company finds itself in the middle of a crisis or conflict, it needs to show the public and journalists a willingness to be honest and an eagerness to resolve issues. In an era where dependability is everything, a company can foster public support and good communication by exhibiting cooperation and offering reassurances. While, journalists may be more willing to listen to all the facts, companies *must* follow through on their plans to resolve their crisis or conflict because reporters are more likely to follow up to make sure the problems are settled. It’s also very likely that employees and the public will be right there with them following every twist and turn in the story.