

ISSA Proceedings 2002 - Spectacle And Trauma: An Analysis Of The Media Coverage Of The Oklahoma City Bombing



The headlines in the days and weeks following the Oklahoma City Bombing tell a tragic story of lost lives and harrowing escapes. Storytellers who told of the devastation painted a grim picture of the horror that occurred in the Alfred P. Murrah Building on April 19, 1995. The media translated the spectacle of trauma, individuals suffering from injury, and the loss of family and friends into best selling stories. The Oklahoma City Bombing coverage included dozens of narratives of the private pain and suffering that individuals experienced. Trauma was positioned at the center of the political experience of domestic terrorism. It is my belief that the media commodified the disaster as an event for public consumption and positioned the audience as a spectator or watcher. If my contention is correct then it poses a serious problem for the body politic because a spectator that merely watches is disengaged from active participation and does not have the same critical capacities as an involved citizen. In this essay I will advance the thesis that the use of trauma narratives and the spectacle of bodies in pain calls into being an audience that voyeuristically watches a disaster without becoming critically engaged.

It is too easy and perhaps arrogant to cry foul against the media for perverting and commodifying people's suffering for profit. After all, they are providing coverage that public wants to watch, wants to listen to, and wants to read. In addition, there are plenty of alternative media sources for those who wish to critically engage the issues. I do not wish to focus my attention in this essay simply on criticizing the media. Instead I believe it is more fruitful to examine the arguments that become embedded in trauma narratives. Argumentation theorists such as Goodnight (1982, 215) and Zarefsky (1992, 411) have both brought into question the state of public deliberation. Their work has done much to highlight the problems that plague the public sphere. Trauma narratives run the risk of

furthering damaging the spaces available for critical interrogation of public issues. However, there are plenty of examples of the productive use of spectacle and of trauma narratives that have been used to mobilize an engaged and critical citizenry. Some of the best examples come from the Civil Rights Movement. Images of the Freedom Riders, Dr. Martin Luther King, and Rosa Parks did not stifle public action but instead acted as public arguments for justice. The sharing of their trauma mobilized a nation to act. While the problems of racism persist in the United States, few would suggest that the work of these individuals was in vain. So that begs the question of how to determine whether or not a trauma narrative will aid or harm the public sphere. I believe the litmus test for answering this question hinges on the whether the trauma narrative calls into being a critical citizen or a spectator that is disengaged and watches the spectacle for entertainment.

Some of the main stories told in the days and weeks following the Oklahoma City Bombing are recaptured in brief in the headlines repeated here:

“Trapped Woman’s Leg Cut Without Full Anesthetic” (Dana Bradley’s Story),
“Survivor Struck by Amazing Luck” (The accounts of Jack Gobin and Randy Ledger),
“Survivor Hid Under Table: ‘I’ve Got to Get Out of Here’ ” (Brian Espe),
“In Oklahoma City and Beyond, Shadow of Fear Grows” (Volunteer Mary Skinner),
“All I Saw Were Bright Lights” (Daina Bradley),
“Black Oklahoma Lawyer Recalls His Narrow Escape From Federal Building” (Kevin Cox),
“April Mourning” (the children of the America’s Kids Day Care Center),
“Answers to a Prayer” (Jim Denny’s two children found alive),
“Doctors Sacrifice a Leg to Save a Life” (Daina Bradley),
“The Last Life Saved” (Surgeons save Brandy Ligons).

A photograph carried on front pages around the world showed firefighter Chris Fields carrying the burned body of Baylee Almon. Viewing pain and agony can be a very emotional experience and sometimes the images of trauma compel the public to act. It is not my intent to suggest that these stories should not have been told. Rather, I seek to understand how the stories displaced or collapsed the space for critical coverage of the issue of domestic terrorism. While these stories gave us heroes (and then villains) somewhere in the mix they failed to act as a

catalyst for serious dialogue about domestic terrorism in the United States. This essay seeks to find an answer for how and why that happened.

1. The Proclivity to Seek Ethics in Argumentation Studies

In his landmark Essay *The Second Persona*, Edwin Black advances the argument that a discourse implies a certain type of auditor and that this condition makes an evaluation of the ethics of the rhetor possible (1970, 109-119). By examining the audience a discourse calls into being, Black suggests a model for evaluating the ethics of the argument advanced. The central thrust of making appraisals and judgments provides a useful method for examining whether the presentation of a trauma narrative is conducive to an active and critical citizenry or whether it calls into being a spectator. Working from the audience called into being, it is possible to make delineations between effective and valuable uses of spectacle and uses which collapse public space for critical engagement of the issues by examining the auditors their narratives call into being.

What is missing from Black's model is an analysis of the Other that is not present. Philip Wander (1999, 370) provides an important modification to Black's initial model by including a third persona: the being not present. So the model offered now includes a first persona that represents the author/rhetor, a second persona that is the audience the author calls into being, and a third persona who is the being the audience is told not to become. In order to analyze the narratives of trauma that emerged after the Oklahoma City Bombing it is necessary to tease out the second and third persona implied in the discourse. By examining the trauma narratives it becomes possible to identify the audience envisioned. Interestingly, the search for the second and third persona is problematized by the fact that the audience called into being is not necessarily an active one. The messages do not suggest who the audience should be or not be. Instead, the audience is displaced as outside observers. The indignation that is felt by the audience is not channeled into a dialogue about the issue of domestic terrorism. Rather, domestic terrorism is highlighted as an issue that the government should manage. Like a movie, the authorities are cast in the role of the protagonist and are expected to bring the villains to justice and create safety for the community. The public is left with a marginal role (at best) of unconditional support in bringing the villains to justice and in supporting whatever policies are created to stop the atrocity from being repeated in the future. No sustained dialogue or debate is called for and domestic terrorism is relegated to the government as a

problem to be handled.

Coverage of the Oklahoma City Bombing included more than just trauma narratives and some of the messages called for an active community to send aid to those in distress. Other calls to action were seriously misguided and played on stereotypes and rumors. For example, in the immediate aftermath of the bombing a Reuter's dispatch said that the suspects were of Middle East descent and had dark hair and beards (Lattin, 1995, 16A). This message placed many innocent citizens in the United States who happened to be of Middle Eastern descent at risk of violence. In addition, the message created an inside for Americans and an outside for Middle Easterners that fosters and perpetuates the idea that the followers of Islam are fundamentalist terrorists. Luc Boltanski (1999, 58) suggests that the identification of the persecutor as a 'foreigner' often allows collective fault to be placed on a scapegoat and this process taps into xenophobic impulses in the audience. In this case, even if the identification had been correct it would be problematic. While the authors may not intentionally be looking to cast blame on all persons of Middle Eastern descent or Islamic belief, the audience they envision will be active in preventing Middle Easterners from acting to hurt the community in the future. The audience envisioned is called upon to be xenophobic and to lay blame on the individuals and groups responsible. This message does not isolate the suspects as individuals but rather openly identifies a group membership as the most salient part of identifying them.

As significant as the Reuter's dispatch was in analyzing media coverage of the Oklahoma City Bombing, the other stories of pain and suffering were also immensely significant in terms of the audience they would call into being. Boltanski (1999, 20) distinguishes between the spectator who is called to speak out against suffering and the spectator who gets pleasure from the internal states of arousal that viewing suffering brings to some people. Fascination and horror are states of emotional arousal. When we view others in states of suffering and no direct action is immediately possible it is possible to become an audience that is anaesthetized to the pain and who gets a perverse sense of involvement in the suffering. The ethics of crafting a disaster into a series of stories can be judged on the basis of the position of the spectator. If as Boltanski suggests, the spectator is called upon to speak then there is great potential for a productive politics of spectacle. If the spectator is meant only to watch the story unfold and be entertained by the drama then the position of the body politic will likely rapidly

deteriorate.

2. Trauma Narratives of the Oklahoma City Bombing

The language used in many of the stories that were produced about the victims of the Oklahoma City Bombing was emotionally charged. The coverage of Time Magazine included a story by Nancy Gibbs entitled "The Blood of Innocents: In the Aftermath, Tales of Horror and Heroism" that discussed in detail the America's Kids Day Center and the rescue efforts. Gibbs wrote:

The sobs from inside the rubble told rescue workers instantly that children were still in the building, still alive. They plunged into the debris, turning over cribs and furniture, hoping to find signs of life, catching their breath at the sight of babies burned beyond recognition. "We started moving bricks and rocks," said police sergeant John Avera, "and we found two babies." Firemen tenderly carried the infants, as paramedics wrapped them in long white gauze like christening dresses. Several toddlers were found wandering around the underground parking lot, searching for parents. The parents in turn scrambled through the chaos, frantic to find their children. "You haven't seen my daughter, have you?" one woman asked everyone as she passed. Nurse Shirley Moser began tagging dead children. "Their faces had been blown off," she says. "They found a child without a head." Children from the Day Care Center across the street who survived the explosion tumbled into the street, sliced by flying glass. They looked for parents and were scooped up by strangers, fearful of more tragedies.

The article goes on to discuss many of the children who perished in the bombing and where their parents and families were and how they responded to their loss. Debbie Almon, the grandmother of Baylee Almon is quoted asking for the funeral to be kept private saying "We just don't want this to be a circus."

The coverage of Newsweek Magazine included a similar story about the rescue of Daina Bradley written by Marc Peyser. With the title "Survivor: 'All I Saw Were Bright Lights'" the story told of Dr. Andy Sullivan's amputation of Daina Bradley's leg:

When the rescuers finally reached Bradley, she saw that falling debris had boxed her into a coffin-size cave. A concrete chunk had stopped tumbling just 18 inches above her face. The rescue team freed her arm, but they could not remove the massive slab that had crushed her leg. When the emergency team's doctors first said they would have to cut off her leg above the knee to save her life, she resisted. But when doctors left her for forty-five minutes during a second bomb

scare that interrupted the rescue, she realized she might not escape at all. That made up her mind: "I was like, 'I wanna get outta here. Do whatever you have to do to get me out'." It wasn't easy. Dr. Andy Sullivan, the smallest doctor on the scene, had to climb headfirst into the hole where Bradley was wedged. With no room for a saw, Sullivan used several scalpels for the amputation. It took ten minutes.

Bradley lost both of her children and her mother in the explosion. Her story was told in hundreds of newspapers and dozens of magazines.

The many stories and narratives of what happened at Oklahoma City have a surreal quality to them. One almost feels like they are watching a movie or reading a book. The heavy use of adjectives seems designed to capture and keep the audience's interest. It seems parallel to an automobile accident that causes massive traffic congestion as passers by slow to a crawl to try to get a look at the wreckage and those injured. In the days following the bombing news stations show pictures of the frame of the Murrah Building and of the rescue efforts. The lines between news and entertainment are blurred together and the stories are crafted for maximum emotional effect. Why were these stories and dozens of others like them told in this fashion? Certainly the parents, families, and friends of the victims took no comfort in these stories of their loved one's suffering being shared with the world. The cynic would offer the idea that the media has shared the information as a commodity that the public has a right to consume. I believe that the reason for these narratives being shared might also have to do with a set of arguments embedded within the discourse of the stories that functions at two levels. First, while the stories might not fit traditional molds for what constitutes an argument, they certainly include a vision of the world by defining the heroes, villains, and victims. Second, the messages seem to have an underlying message about the community coming together and the need for our nation to collectively heal. Having a sense of the devastation seems to be tied to mending the fabric of the body politic. In order to get a sense for each of the two premises it is useful to return to the text of the examples.

Gibb's vocabulary in describing the trauma of what happened at the America's Kids day care center and the day care center across the street is at once eloquent and brutal. Images evoked by the description of the burned bodies of children wrapped in white gauze like christening gowns are intense. White has traditionally been a color associated with innocence and purity. In stark contrast

to a picture of a child brought before God and family in a celebration, Gibb's reveals the nightmarish and dissonant image of what happened. Any parent has an instinctive fear of their infant toddler being in danger and I believe can sense the terror of being alone and in trauma. Using two passages, Gibb's covers the fears of the children and their sense of confusion and pain. The scene of the story then turns grim and the harsh transition to a nurse tagging dead children reminds the audience that this a tragedy and there will be no happy ending to this tale. In short and terrible sentences, Gibb's tells us that children have had their faces off and one infant is found decapitated. Through this very brief story there is both a vision of the world that represents an argument and there are hints of a call to community. Beginning with the vision of the world, it is helpful to directly articulate the heroes, victims, and villains. The heroes are the fire fighters and paramedics who put their own lives in jeopardy to rescue those who have survived and to carry out the bodies of those slain so they might be properly buried. The children are the guiltless and blameless victims. Though not unmasked or identified in the narrative, we are also given an impression of what the villains are like. Carrying the front-page photo of fire fighter Chris Fields and the burned body of infant Baylee Almon, the New York Post ran the headline 'Evil Cowards'. Gibb's does not have to decry this to get the same message to her audience. The visual imagery of blowing up innocent children accomplished the same effect. While there is no direct and clear textual evidence, I also believe that a part of the reason for sharing these stories was to try to bind the community together in a time of pain and agony. In times of great tragedy and trauma, appeals to patriotism and nationalism are often common and there seems to be the unspoken agreement that the narratives of what happened are a warrant for unity in the face of great evil. The message of uniting against a common enemy informs the stories and the idea of a community suffering and then healing together resonates across the coverage.

Peyser's account of the interview with Daina Bradley takes a similar if more subdued tone. Also, the fact that Daina agreed to give the interview seems to slightly alter the relationship between the victim, the storyteller, and the audience. Peyser does play on a common fear in an initial description of what happened. Likening the hole that Bradley fell into to a coffin certainly must draw an emotional response from anyone reading the story that suffers from claustrophobia. The thought of being trapped in a coffin underground is terrifying and I imagine the description was meant to trigger an emotional response. No one

would want to lose their leg and the discussion of Daina thinking about escape versus survival while the doctors were forced to evacuate because of the fear of another explosion must have also been frightening. The article closes by revealing that Daina lost her mother and two children in the blast. Daina tells us to treat everything like china because it may someday be gone. Peyser closes by writing, "Sometimes, in a flash." Again we have heroes and a victim along with a behind the scenes villain. Our heroes are the doctors and more importantly Daina herself. In the face of death and devastation she made a difficult decision that saved her life. In addition, we continue to have a call to community that resonates around the story. The closing sequence seems to argue that the world is a dangerous place and we must place value on our families, friends, and communities because they can be taken from us by evils lurking all around us.

Drawing a distinction between news, entertainment, and argumentation is a rather difficult task. Media sources attempt to let the public know when an important event has happened. As blurred as the line is between information and entertainment, I suspect the lines between news and argumentation are even more compromised. Hollihan and Baaske (1994, 19) believe that virtually all arguments can be evaluated as stories. The reverse also seems to be the case: All stories can be evaluated as arguments. There are persuasive and constitutive elements in virtually every story ever told and how stories are told often also entails additional arguments about how the world should be. The arguments embedded within narratives of trauma about the Oklahoma City Bombing position the audience as a spectator to suffering but also include some basic arguments about life. In drawing a distinction between simplistic and unquestioned assumptions about how life should be in contrast to a call for a critical and invested public a judgment can be made that works from Black's model of the Second Persona. Because the audience envisioned by the narratives is not a critical one, the messages should be problematized.

3. Judgment and the Critical Capacity of Active Citizens

The ability to make decisions and judgments about public affairs is considered instrumental to maintaining a successful democracy. Hicks and Langsdorf (2000, 1), working in agreement with Frans van Eemeren, note that argumentation is the lifeblood of a democracy. They write:

Absent a radically democratic political culture and well-educated citizenry, a 'deliberative democracy' could easily become a 'formalist' simulation of

democracy. Hence, an adequate proceduralist account of democratic deliberation must attend to the material conditions of its existence - including and especially, the formation of arguers imbued with a democratic ethos. (2000, 10)

This move does not presuppose already existing rational agents, but instead offers the experience of deliberation as a means to foster and inculcate a commitment to democratic norms of governance and a democratic ethos of critical scrutiny.

Making judgments of discourse on the basis of the audience invoked provides a useful means to evaluate a rhetor and when coupled or conjoined with the question of how a narrative opens or forecloses space for democratic ethics I believe an argumentation scholar is provided with a useful tool for assessing the worth of a discourse. The effects of a public discourse on the body politic can have serious ramifications for the types of thought and questioning the discourse produces or calls into being. In order to trace or map out the implications envisioned within a discourse it is necessary to examine the political subjectivity of the audience as seen by the rhetor. While political subjectivity is not fixed and is radically contingent, the discourse a rhetor uses produces an image of what an audience's subjectivity should be and that image is worth analyzing. Traditional approaches to rhetorical analysis have either eschewed questions of political subjectivity or have positioned the audience as those persons capable of being influenced by a message (see Bitzer, 1999[1964], 221). In stark contrast to this model, Barbara Biesecker (1999, 243) offers a thematic of difference that draws for the work of Jacques Derrida to argue that rhetorical discourses are processes that discursively produce audiences. So in many ways, the audience a discourse envisions is often constituted by the discourse. If a discourse calls for a critical citizenry to test ideas and arguments for their merit then the discourse is productive and induces democratic behaviors. If the discourse makes the audience spectators who are expected to blindly accept simple premises then the discourse is especially dangerous and should be cautiously examined.

Coverage of the Oklahoma City Bombing has a decidedly problematic feel. The recipients of the message are never expected to critically engage the issue of domestic terrorism. While I am principally concerned with the diminishing of the critical capacities of citizens in our democracy, the politics of the media also seem to have a rightward and conservative drift. While trauma narratives incite strong emotions, in this case they do little to activate the critical capacities of the audience. To explain this point it is helpful to return to examples of productive

uses of spectacle. The strength of examples from the Civil Rights Movement illustrates the radical difference between spectacle aimed at activating an audience and spectacle that generates apathy. In the case of Rosa Parks, we have a spectacle that is intrinsically tied to a question of justice. Even if the spectacle was not tied to a boycott of public transportation, her story makes demands of an audience. Like Mahatma Gandhi, Civil Rights leaders in the United States used images of trauma to collectively demand change. The collective image of America was challenged and ruptured. No longer could citizens believe unquestioningly that the United States was the land of the free and the home of the brave in the face of the massive unmasking of racism in the 1950s and 1960s. Even though racism persists today, the spectacle of trauma generated by the Civil Rights Movement has made a lasting and democratic change in our country by challenging dominant assumptions and norms.

I do not think targeting the media as the agent responsible for the lack of deliberation on the subject of domestic terrorism is either entirely fair or entirely unfounded. There is certainly evidence that the media has selected a format for telling stories that sells their product. My own political bent makes me suspicious of the politics forwarded by stories that do not call for direct action and deliberation. And I believe irrespective of what side of the political spectrum one is on, that most of us can be in agreement that a public divested of involvement in public issues is at risk. So I think it is worthwhile at this point to ask the rather broad question of what types of coverage would have better invested the audience with critical capacities and awareness about domestic terrorism. This is not an easy question that can be summed up in a closing paragraph. I think an important first start is to make the audience aware of how they have been positioned within discourse. If the audience is separated from the issue then they will always remain a spectator. If the audience is imbued with critical faculties then they are encouraged to join in and weigh in on the issues in the future. In the time following the Oklahoma City Bombing there was a great deal of public condemnation of fringe right wing militia groups. Coupled with the retelling of trauma narratives, the media also offered coverage of the national memorial. At the same time Congress rushed to pass anti-terrorism legislation and deliberated about domestic terrorism in the United States. The deliberations about how to make our country safe and what steps are appropriate and what steps go too far should have been the focus of media coverage. Instead, the use of dramatic stories left the public with fleeting images of intense pain and trauma and no

deep knowledge or investment in the direction our country should take. As argumentation scholars, it is important that we question and interrogate messages that call for complacent and disengaged publics. The need for investment in collective life is immense and by engaging the public to deliberate and to reason publicly about domestic terrorism we can perhaps call into being a public that represents a democracy. When Congress passes legislation concerning domestic terrorism and the vast majority of the public has no idea about the content of the new laws then we truly have an impoverished body politic. To reconcile this dilemma it is not a bad idea to start with a discourse that calls into being a critical citizenry.

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