

Taking Your Academic Expertise Public: Lessons Learned Responding to the 11 September Crisis—

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Introduction

We spent the first working hour of 11 September 2001 in a conference room with our research assistants, oblivious to the outside world. At the end of the meeting we cheerfully strolled into the department office only to find the staff frantically setting up a television set. A student answering the phones said, "Two planes have hit the World Trade Center; a Palestinian group has claimed responsibility. Professor Gerner, there's a reporter on the phone, can you talk with him?"

The advantage of the academic life is that society allows us to spend years reading things no one else reads, writing articles and books *almost* no one else reads, and traveling to places no one else travels to. But in times of crisis, when the totally unexpected becomes reality, society understandably expects that we serve our communities with knowledge, explanation, insights, and policy alternatives. The days, weeks, and months following the attacks of 11 September were such an occasion and many academics experienced sudden demands for public commentary and

— We appreciate being given the opportunity to write up these observations. We received useful suggestions from University of Kansas journalism professor (and former TV reporter) Tom Volek, as well as from the *ISP* editor and an anonymous reviewer.

analysis. In this essay, we discuss how we handled this and the lessons we have learned in the process.

Our Environment

The University of Kansas (KU) in Lawrence is the primary research university for the Kansas City and Topeka metropolitan areas. Contrary to their Dorothy-and-Toto image, many Kansans have considerable interest in international affairs, motivated in part by the state's role as a transportation, communications, and agricultural export center. Whiteman Air Force Base, from which B-2 flew missions to bomb Afghan targets halfway around the planet, is about an hour east of Kansas City. The presence of the Command and General Staff College at nearby Ft. Leavenworth brings a disproportionate number of career military officers—both active duty and retired—to the area.

Our university has strong programs dealing with most world regions, but devotes only limited resources to the Middle East due to an historical commitment to Cold War priorities such as Eastern Europe and Latin America. In September 2001 this weakness was exacerbated because KU's sole Middle East historian had just retired and the Religious Studies Department's Islamist scholar was new to KU. Gerner was the only person within the university with a primary research interest in the Middle East. Schrod taught U.S. defense policy and, like Gerner, had lived in the region. Both of us work on foreign policy and had been actively involved as speakers on international issues prior to 11 September. Much of the public and media interest was therefore directed to the two of us, along with a few other faculty who could address related issues such as political Islam, international law, and unconventional violence, or who were recognized as activists on foreign policy issues.

Getting Information

The events of 11 September gave us a new appreciation of the implications of the contemporary global news environment. On the positive side, a huge amount of information is

available and almost instantly accessible. On the negative side, much of it is incorrect. As a result, the old difficulty of “finding out” has been replaced by the new challenge of “filtering out.”

There are at least three filtering issues, each requiring a different strategy. The short-term task is one of detecting rumors and filling in missing information. This is best dealt with by one’s theoretical knowledge and overall understanding of a situation. The intermediate-term problem involves sorting out conflicting interpretations of events and anticipating future political decisions; this is accomplished by investigating and then “triangulating” multiple sources of information, largely using the Web and email. The long-term challenge is countering inaccurate public perceptions (e.g., all Muslims are Arab; all Arabs hate the United States); this is addressed through general educational efforts.

In the short-term, the 11 September crisis generated considerable rumor and misinformation, even within (particularly within...) the mainstream media. In response, we found ourselves drawing on our substantive knowledge and theoretical understanding of politics. Common sense also helped a lot. By “theory,” we do not mean the latest neo-this, neo-that—in fact, highly nuanced academic theories are nearly useless when most of the relevant facts are not known—but instead broader understandings of how political systems generally operate. While the scale of destruction caused by the 11 September attacks was unprecedented for a terrorist action, the underlying political mechanisms were not transformed overnight. Assessments about the roots and consequences of that attack based on generalizations from past behavior were more likely to be correct (if less entertaining) than assessments that presumed everything had changed.

In responding to the initial accusation of Palestinian responsibility, for instance, Gerner was able to inject a cautionary note into the discussion by pointing out that many years ago the organization in question rejected the use of violence outside the borders of Israel/Palestine. Thus, it seemed highly unlikely—although of course not impossible—that this group had suddenly and secretly changed its policy and then successfully implemented a complex and spectacular operation in the United States. This assessment subsequently proved correct. The attack was immediately

denounced by the group's leaders and the source of the initial claim turned out to be an unsigned faxed letter, presumably sent by someone who wanted to undercut the (limited) public sympathy for the Palestinian cause created by second *intifada*.

For the intermediate-term problem of verifying stories and figuring out likely policy decisions, the Web is an incredible resource. All of the elite English-language print media—both in the United States and elsewhere—are now available on the Web (as are some electronic media) and the sites are frequently updated as stories are breaking. One can quickly obtain a story from *The New York Times* (<http://www.nyt.com/>), then check how the same information is being treated by the *Washington Post* (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/>), *Manchester Guardian* (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/>), BBC (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/>), and Israel's *Ha'aretz* (<http://www.haaretzdaily.com/>). This would not have been possible even three years ago.

Specialized web pages and email list-serve messages are also invaluable, particularly for gaining insight into a variety of Middle East and Central Asian perspectives. For instance, the U.S.-based Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP) (<http://www.merip.org/>) has links to numerous resources, including articles from scholars, activists, and journalists from the region and web sites for the Northern Alliance, Pakistani and Afghani newspapers, and other organizations. The Center for Economic & Social Rights (<http://www.cesr.org/>) quickly created several excellent fact sheets on Afghanistan and announced their existence through various email lists. Birzeit University's Guide to Palestinian Websites (<http://www.birzeit.edu/links/>) provides easy access to a range of Palestinian and Israeli reactions; the Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information (<http://www.ipcri.org/>), *Palestine Report Online* (<http://www.jmcc.org/media/reportonline>), the Israeli human rights organization *B'Tselem* (<http://www.btselem.org/>), and Israeli peace groups such as *Gush Shalom* (<http://www.gush-shalom.org/english/>) fulfill similar functions. In response to the crisis, the International Studies Association set up a new web site providing access of to the expertise of ISA members (<http://www.isanet.org/experts.html/>).

We used the Web extensively to make sense of the story behind the infamous CNN video clip of Palestinians celebrating the attacks, which, in life imitating the movie *Groundhog Day*, was replayed endlessly in the days immediately following 11 September. Based on emails and phone calls from friends in the West Bank, we confirmed almost immediately our expectation that celebration was not the typical Palestinian response. Information provided by email lists established, for instance, that Palestinians had held a large demonstration in sympathy with the victims of the attack at the U.S. Consulate in East Jerusalem and thousands signed a sympathy book. CNN apparently did not deem these events newsworthy, but an email from the American Friends Service Committee (<http://www.afsc.org/mideasthome.htm/>) contained a link to images by Associated Press and Reuters photographers of these and other expressions of Palestinian solidarity with attack victims.

Meanwhile, two rumors circulated widely about the original video: that the pictures were actually from archival material taken a decade earlier or that the recorded celebratory demonstration had been staged (by giving children candy and telling them to chant political slogans for the cameras) before details about the attack had become widely known among Palestinians. CNN eventually went to great lengths to document that the film had, in fact, been taken on 11 September by a Reuters film crew and posted this information on its web site (<http://www.cnn.com/2001/US/09/20/cnn.statement/>; accessed 5 November 2001). This did not preclude the possibility that the demonstration had been set up by someone other than the Reuters crew, however, and for several days we tried to track this story down. In the end, sources we trusted (often people we knew personally) confirmed that some small anti-U.S. demonstrations by Palestinians did occur in the initial hours following the attacks; we were never able to resolve the question of whether or not the particular demonstration filmed by Reuters was spontaneous or staged. From our perspective, that was sufficient—events similar to the CNN film clip had occurred in a few places, so the story was not the complete fabrication as some had alleged.

Finally, the long term issue of filling in fundamental information is more like conventional teaching, except that the motivation is higher and there are no exams. In Kansas — and we assume

throughout the United States — we have found a significant increase in interest about Islam, the Middle East, and U.S. foreign policy in recent months. This has provided a number of “teaching moments,” through talks specifically devoted to the events of 11 September, in lectures addressing related topics, while answering questions following these presentations, in speaking with the media, or by mentoring student activist groups. One of our colleagues, Leonardo Villalón, who is an expert on political Islam, would start his presentations with the assertion “There is no such thing as ‘Islam’.” He would then go on to explain that Islam has at least as much diversity as Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, or any other major spiritual tradition. The Sufi orders of Senegal, for instance, have about as much in common with the Wahhabism of the Taliban as the Vatican’s Roman Catholicism shares with a fundamentalist Protestant church in Alabama or an unprogrammed Quaker meeting in London. Other professors have turned these public forums into opportunities to explore the various meanings of the term “terrorism” and to illustrate how the word is often invoked inconsistently by policy makers, academics, and activists alike. Finally, we have used this new curiosity to address background topics that people should be interested in but generally are not. Schrodt, for example, has adapted the controversy over the U.S. response to the events of 11 September to illustrate the on-going debates on the nature of the post-Cold War U.S. military and also to emphasize that there is significant division of opinion within the military itself on whether initiating a war in Afghanistan will accomplish its goal of reducing global terrorism.

Public Forums

Throughout the fall and winter, we spoke at a number of public forums, some sponsored by the university, others organized by various religious and civic groups. Such activities are worthwhile in their own right and are also valuable for gauging how (at least part of) the nonacademic community views events. This, in turn, is helpful in assessing what to say to the media. In our area, the individuals attending these presentations are not a representative a cross-section of the community but are instead drawn disproportionately from the “attentive public.” Thus, there are usually a large number of retired faculty, retired military personnel, school teachers,

and political activists present. Many of those in the audience have distinct points of view—usually about a third of their “questions” are in fact assertions—but they often have a sophisticated understanding of the issues. At the same time, there are always individuals for whom 11 September and its aftermath has been a political awakening. These folks are eager to learn but lack the sociological, political, and historical knowledge of the first group. Juggling these two sets of needs can be tricky. We tend to begin with some basic factual material, move fairly quickly to more advanced analysis, then use questions and discussion to bring out additional background information.

In the first two weeks of the crisis, we felt quite out of synch with much of the public discussion. In retrospect, we have concluded this was due in large part to two factors. First, we were looking at the situation analytically, whereas much of the initial public discourse was rhetorical. This was most conspicuous in the widespread use of the word “war” when discussing possible U.S. responses to terrorism. We were continually reminding people that — aside from the casualty figures — there was little or nothing about the situation that resembled a “war” as that term is generally understood. This distinction was not always appreciated by our audiences. As time went by, the war rhetoric moderated; then, once the U.S. initiated a conventional war against the Taliban forces in Afghanistan, it was possible to analyze U.S. actions in fairly conventional political science terms.

The second problem—and one that still presents difficulties—comes from the differences in outlook that one has after living in a foreign culture. We’ve had a much easier time discussing international issues with a local organic farmer who spent several years in West Africa (and who on occasion greets us in Wolof or Arabic) than with colleagues who have spent their entire lives in the United States. This gap is profound and requires great care to bridge. The “why do they hate us?” issue, for instance, seems obvious to people who have observed United States foreign policy through the eyes of other cultures and a complete mystery to those who have not. When discussing how the United States is perceived abroad, we have found it essential to clarify the difference between *explaining* why people in other countries may not like policies of the United States and

justifying actions based on those disagreements. At our first community panel discussion, KU philosophy and women's studies professor Ann Cudd went into great depth on this distinction and we subsequently incorporated her approach into many of our presentations.

A final issue related to public presentations is the often ignored distinction between analysis and entertainment. Because of trends in the electronic media—the “screaming heads” format of *The McLaughlin Group* immediately comes to mind—U.S.-Americans are accustomed to seeing “both sides” of an issue presented in a stark and rhetorical fashion. This creates two problems. First, it means that many audience members are not prepared to take seriously a nuanced discussion with more than two “sides” that addresses the complexities inherent in virtually all political issues. Second, when there is professional agreement on fundamental points, this is seen as “one-sided.” A department symposium in which we were involved illustrated both of these difficulties. For two hours, nine political science faculty—who rarely agree about *anything*—commented on various aspects of the crisis. Having not compared notes ahead of time, we were all frankly surprised at the level of consensus in our basic analyses, although there were certainly subtle differences in emphasis or interpretation. Later we heard that some in the audience found this unsettling and were disappointed that we had “simply given a party line.” They neither accepted that as scholars we might reach similar conclusions nor recognized that our assessments did diverge at some points.

Tom Volek, a journalism professor at KU, pointed out to us that there is a synergistic relationship between public speaking and access to the media. Being invited to these events—which are often covered at least briefly, by local reporters—establishes you as an “expert”, and therefore it is more likely that you will be called upon to comment on a breaking story. If you would like to establish yourself as a media source, he suggests offering to give talks to local service clubs such as Rotary. These groups are usually looking for speakers, and local media elites such as newspaper editors and the general managers of television stations are frequently members.

The Electronic Media

After 11 September, we participated in two types of television formats: short interviews and extended panel discussions. Both provide substantial exposure—in the days following these programs, we were surprised at just how many people would say “I saw you on TV.”¹

Remember that you are doing the reporter a favor by agreeing to be a source, and be cautious about reporters that appear to have a pre-ordained agenda and simply want to use you to strengthen their already determined story. Before agreeing to do an interview, it is legitimate to ask explicitly what the journalist is looking for and decide on the basis of the answer whether you are the appropriate person, given the angle s/he intends to take. On the other hand, don't assume that your relationship with the media has to be adversarial. To the contrary, if you can build a solid, respectful, professional relationship with a reporter, news director, or editor, it can be mutually beneficial without in any way compromising your professional integrity.

For a short interview, a reporter and camera operator would typically come to our offices and record five to fifteen minutes of material. Between thirty seconds and three minutes of this would actually be aired, usually on the local evening news in conjunction with national reports on the same topic. This format puts a premium on the much-maligned “sound bite”—a concise, straightforward, self-contained statement of thirty seconds or less that makes a single clear point in an easily understood subject-verb-object structure. Our late mentor and friend Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, who was often asked to comment on Palestinian issues, taught us that before going into any interview, you should have three main ideas in mind. Then be sure to make these points,

¹ We have had far less success with commercial radio. Radio shows tend to be live, the interviews are interspersed with advertisements for Crazy Bob's Used Car Emporium rather than clips of Colin Powell, and the interviewers—frequently “personalities” instead of news reporters—are often completely unprepared. Our experience may be idiosyncratic to the Kansas City region, however. Public radio, in contrast, works more like a cross between print and electronic media.

whatever the reporter asks. You have no guarantee that any of them will end up in the final story, but in our experience they do, more often than not.

This type of TV interview material is always edited. Technically, if you say something on tape, it is fair for the reporter to broadcast it. Thus, it is a good idea to pause and think before you begin speaking. However, since you are functioning as an “expert” rather than as a public figure (and the story is about an issue, not about you) if you say something you wish you hadn’t, you can ask tell the reporter not to use it or indicate you want to respond again. Reputable reporters will generally respect this. (If one doesn’t, complain to the station’s general manager and discuss the issue with your university public relations office). The journalist is not Mike Wallace, you are not being interviewed for *Sixty Minutes*, and if you look good, the station looks good.

It is also important to be animated. Television exaggerates gestures and facial expressions so this can be overdone, but in general if you permit your voice and body language to convey your interest in and knowledge about the subject matter, it makes for a better interview. That, in turn, tends to result in more air time and a greater opportunity to present your analysis. (If you *aren’t* both interested and knowledgeable, you probably shouldn’t be doing the interview in the first place.)

With the time involved setting up and taking down equipment, an in-office interview typically takes about a half hour. We often spend the off-camera intervals talking about the issue more generally—this helps to establish rapport and also provides reporters with information that will help them choose the most salient material. Sometimes a reporter will actually ask ahead of time whether there are any questions s/he should be certain to include. This is a great opportunity to let the reporter know how you think it would be best to frame the interview.

The longer format of a televised panel discussion provides much more time to develop a sustained argument. This can be a major advantage, particularly if you have an intelligent and skilled moderator. The presence of others on the panel creates energy and you can play off their comments, either in support or in disagreement. If you are able to do so in a gentle and non-

offensive fashion, this is also an occasion to use a bit of humor to connect with the viewers. Televised panel discussions are generally either “live” or “live to tape” (which means the tape is running continuously and will be shown without editing). In this respect, it is much like a public forum with a much larger (but invisible) audience. That can be intimidating, particularly if you don’t know ahead of time what to expect. No one wants to look like a panicky “deer in the headlights” when asked a difficult question. Verbal stalling for a few seconds—“That’s a really good question ...”—while you quickly think through your previously identified “main ideas” usually works well in such situations. Or if you are really stumped, you can always throw the question to another participant: “That’s not an issue I know a lot about. Susan Smith, what’s your take on it?”. We have found it also helps to focus on educating listeners about the issues, which takes the attention off of our own “performance.” Finally, whatever the attitude of the moderator and other participants, don’t get drawn into a nasty exchange which will just make you look bad. Remain calm, confident, polite, and firm.

The Print Media

Much of what we have said about dealing with electronic media applies to the print media as well. In particular, the “three points” rule still holds: one can talk with a reporter for fifteen minutes, but only three or four sentences will end up in the story. The most useful thing that you can give a reporter is the “lead”—the opening quote or paragraph that frames the rest of the story. For example, Schrodt alerted a reporter doing a general feature on terrorism in the *Toronto Globe and Mail* (13 September 2001) to a biographical profile of a recent suicide attacker in Gaza; this became the lead for a story focusing on how individuals who will commit suicide for political ends tend to be quiet and deeply committed rather than clinically insane.

Interviews with the print media are often over the phone, with the reporter’s keyboard clicking in the background. As with the electronic media, it is perfectly acceptable to ask a reporter not to use something you’ve said, although it is far better to preface your remarks with “This is on background”—and get the reporter to confirm this—rather than asking for background status after

the fact. If you request it, many reporters will read back the statements he or she intends to quote directly. One advantage of a phone interview: You can work out a couple of succinct, sagacious comments ahead of time and give them to the reporter more-or-less verbatim.

In the weeks following 11 September, both of us had several long background discussions with reporters from major papers outside of the Kansas City area. These were, in effect, one-on-one tutorials. Gerner, for instance, spent an hour with a woman who was putting together a full page story on Islam. While time-consuming, this background assistance may still be worthwhile—even if not a single quote appears in print—provided the reporter is intelligent (in our experience, most are). This is another important form of long-term education. Whether we like it or not, the elite print media are the filter through which academic ideas get into the policy community and background interviews are how reporters (and their editors) get to understand our approach. As a side benefit, a good reporter asks questions one hasn't thought about and provides a sense of how the public is viewing the issue. We would often find that discussions with reporters (print and electronic) would help us in framing issues for later public presentations.

The Professional and the Political

As “boomers” who came of age in the 1960s, we have always been acutely aware of the ethical dimensions to the topics we study. As political scientists, we—rather than our farmer friend with experience in West Africa—are given preferential access to the media and public forums. But we also are citizens of a democracy and we have values that lead us to take certain positions. We do not subscribe to the myth of a “value free” social science (which, often as not, has been advanced by individuals who are simply comfortable with the value-laden status quo). At the same time, our social role as professional political scientists imposes some obligations on us that would not be incumbent upon a farmer, such as the responsibility to provide an honest and fair articulation of views that we do not ourselves hold.

This is especially difficult when one is attempting to balance advocacy of a particular position with helping those reading or hearing our remarks to analyze the issues for themselves. In our

classes, we teach students to collect and review evidence honestly, to think independently and critically, to reassess their preconceived ideas about the world, and to recognize that there are competing explanations for political events as well as alternative approaches to interpreting and resolving contemporary situations. We encourage students to make up their own minds, based on empirical and theoretical evidence, rather than simply adopting our positions. This perspective carries over into our public speaking and media work. It often leads us to query listeners on their own opinions or to answer a reporter's question: "Those who believe A would say X, while those who believe B would respond Y. I come down on the side of B for the following reasons ..."

The challenge of integrating our political and professional perspectives became evident to us in a document when we prepared a document on 22 September titled "Ten Alternative Responses to Terrorism." This piece grew out of our frustration with a well-meaning caller to a National Public Radio talk show who was completely unable to answer the question: "What can the U.S. do *except* go to war?" We drafted a short list, presented this verbally at an anti-war rally in Lawrence that afternoon, posted a version on a web site (<http://people.ku.edu/~schrodtt/alternatives.html>) and sent out a few email notices indicating it was available. In the following five days, the site received hundreds of visits and the list was apparently circulated far beyond Lawrence via email and as a printed piece.

"Ten Alternatives" is a political, rather than an academic, document. It is deliberately short and crafted to be rhetorically effective. It fits on a single page and was addressed to an immediate time and audience—individuals opposed to a military response to the events of 11 September. It will never be recommended reading for Ph.D. qualifying exams. We deliberately did not include our academic affiliations on the piece: Our university affiliation was evident from the URL and our email addresses, but nothing in the piece indicated we had expertise on the Middle East or international conflict. We have not used "Ten Alternatives" in public presentations except when we were asked to speak as activists rather than as subject experts. Nonetheless, "Ten Alternatives" has probably reached more people than anything else we did in response to the crisis.

This does not, however, indicate intellectual schizophrenia. If pressed, we could readily justify every causal assertion in “Ten Alternatives” with formal arguments and evidence from the academic literature. Indeed, we spent a great deal of time arguing with each other to make certain we both viewed each point as intellectually defensible. But the document as it stands does not have that rigorous validation; thus we see it as fundamentally a statement from citizens rather than one from experts. At the same time, it was precisely because of our academic scholarship—and our perspective from living and working in the Middle East—that we felt a *particular* responsibility to speak out in this situation. While we have interest in and opinions about a variety of domestic and international policy issues, we do not feel the same moral imperative to address each of these as we do when our values and specialized knowledge coincide.

Staying Sane

While our experience following the 11 September attacks certainly could not compare to the stress on individuals involved in the rescue efforts or the intense psychological trauma experienced by those who had lost friends and family, it was nevertheless exhausting. First, the process of continuous information gathering—both tracking a story through newspapers in five different countries and continually monitoring the news so as not to be caught off-guard by an unanticipated question—is very time consuming (notwithstanding the Web). Public speaking, particularly during an emotionally-charged period and with a point-of-view often at odds with the common wisdom, is substantially more draining than lecturing in a classroom, where one usually knows at least some of the students and second-thoughts can be clarified in the next lecture. The large number of such activities meant we effectively doubled our teaching load for several weeks, with new “classes” for which the material changed almost daily. The whole experience felt like an endless Ph.D. oral exam. And all the while, midterms had to be graded, letters of recommendation written, programs administered, research assistants supervised, and grant proposals submitted on time.

We offer three bits of advice on how to cope. First, acknowledge that the situation is difficult and use whatever stress-management strategies you find effective. Second, prioritize public

engagements. Because we are professors, we always tried to accommodate student organizations and groups directly associated with the university. We also accepted virtually all invitations for events when the anticipated the audience would be large but were more selective when a speaking engagement would involve several hours of driving. (For instance, we each independently declined to spend two hours in the car and another 45 minutes waiting around in a studio in order to speak for three minutes on an early morning local news show.) Although we were often asked to speak jointly, we would suggest only one of us participate when the group was small. We also coordinated with other faculty, combining some events and reserving the more labor-intensive panel discussions to larger groups or situations where a range of specialized knowledge was required. Finally, we tried to a large extent to keep the issue at the office and not bring it home to our spouses, a situation somewhat complicated by the fact that we are married to each other. On the occasions we were both on a panel, we usually had no more idea of what the other would say than we would have of any other professional colleague.

As international studies scholars, we have insights and knowledge that our communities require and desire, most notably in times of crisis. By responding to the best of our abilities, we are able to return something to society and help people understand more clearly the world in which we live. It is an opportunity well worth taking.