

**Constructed Reality:  
The Narrative Conceptualization of National Disaster News Coverage**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article employs narrative techniques to analyze various segments of disaster news coverage. Centered on Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm, nine of CNN's evening broadcasts are evaluated in terms of argumentative and aesthetic quality—particularly, fact, relevance, setting, plot, and characterization. Each of these factors helps to further explore TWA Flight 800's explosion, The Station nightclub inferno, and the Minneapolis, Minnesota bridge collapse. Analysis reveals that truth is delivered to and validated by audiences in terms of the cyclical nature, not the individual segments of news coverage. This cycle, the paper argues, is constructed by the source and is therefore a manipulation created by news stations.

**CHAPTER ONE**  
**Welcome to Today's Segment:**  
**An Introduction of Television News**

*“The American People don't believe anything until they've seen it on television.”*  
*Ronald Reagan*

Perhaps Ronald Reagan overstated television's validity in daily American culture, but he properly conveyed the impact with which it is delivered. What initially began as basic technological experimentation has evolved into an American enterprise, an obsession, and fundamentally—a lifestyle. Television's introduction dates back to 1925; after the discovery of electromagnetic waves, a single Dutch windmill was broadcast in America's first televised presentation (Jowett). Although originally disregarded by the public, the significance of this ten minute program was not fleeting (Jowett). Instead, television has continued to progress and modernize, eventually establishing various avenues of public communication and coverage.

Specifically, in the spring of 1941, the televised news format was born (Conway 128). Employees of the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), Robert Skedgell and Richard Hubbell, “developed a newscast with little involvement from the exalted radio news operation”—a deviance from customary methods and a decision which would undeniably “influence the template of television news” (Conway 128). “Foraging a separate identity from the network's radio news,” CBS abandoned simulcasts and instead instated a more visual approach (Conway 130). Consequently, by July 1 of that same year, the federal government

recognized “television broadcasting” not simply as “technological experiment[ation], but rather as “a commercial venture” (Conway 129). Although at this time television “could hardly be considered a ‘mass’ medium,” the implications of Skedgell and Hubbell’s achievement can be extended to the present. “For more than forty years [now], more people in the U.S. have turned to television for their news than any other medium” (Conway 129).

Today, networks other than CBS engage in the practices first established by Skedgell and Hubbell. In June 1980, Cable News Network (CNN) appeared on air—its goal: “to combine the characteristics of a morning and afternoon paper in a single visual medium” (Loory 340). However, CNN’s founder, Ted Turner, differentiated an essential aspect; he strived to eliminate editorials, wishing to “keep the news as impartial and objective as possible” (Loory 340). An initial CNN audience contained “one million potential viewers,” only a fraction of the “80 million” dedicated to CBS, NBC, and ABC. However, as CNN “developed its own persona,” stressing “news rather than the personalities who presented it,” the network expanded, acquiring international systems and eventually “challenging the Big Three” (Loory 341-342).

Recent years have proven successful for CNN as their services today “reach nearly one billion people around the globe” (turner.com). This increasing pervasiveness has resulted in television’s significant control over not only the newswires, but of constructed viewer perception of its televised segments. Realizing this opportunity, as stories develop, newscasters from an array of

stations appear on scene as they deliver live coverage to a captive viewing audience.

For purposes of this paper, CNN serves as the creator of the broadcast messages that will be examined; overall, the cable-accessing public, but more importantly, those who pursue any interest in the unfolding situations, are the established audiences. Only CNN's Evening News segments will be analyzed in this essay—they remained the only broadcasts available in full streaming video. Although this may appear limiting, CNN proves as fair representation due to its undeniable reputation as a reliable news source; nine of its stories on three different tragedies will be used as artifacts.

This thesis, examining a series of CNN's evening newscasts of the July 17, 1996 Trans-World Atlantic Flight 800 explosion, the February 20, 2003 Station Nightclub inferno, and the August 1, 2007 I-35W Minneapolis bridge collapse, argues that coverage assumes narrative characteristics, providing an alternative reality for viewers. Conceptualized, the newscasts adopt distinctive factors of aesthetic and argumentative quality in order to display a truth validated by their audiences. As a result, symbols are generated and positioned by the media—this is of rhetorical importance because examination of this subject will facilitate understanding of human responses to these constructed symbols. Beginning, Chapter 2 presents a review of relevant literature, emphasizing the conscious construction of news stories by their respective networks. Chapter 3 illustrates the narrative paradigm, the framework through which the selected broadcasts are evaluated according to specified, narrative qualifications. In Chapter 4, the

context of Flight 800's explosion is reconstructed, followed by an analysis of three segments of CNN's evening broadcast of the disaster. Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 focus respectively on The Station's blaze and Minnesota's bridge collapse. Chapter 7 culminates in an overall evaluation of the success of CNN's constructed interpretation of the unfolding events.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Continuing Team Coverage: A Review of Literature

Increasingly, news reporting has been transformed from candid representations of unfolding facts to questionable accounts of perceived reality. At the surface, Mary-Lou Galician and Norris D. Vestre conclusively determine in their 1987 study of “Effects of ‘Good News’ and ‘Bad News’ on Newscast Image and Community Image” that a direct correlation exists between the deemed classification of a broadcast, either “bad,” “neutral,” or “good,” and the resulting judgment of the “community-of-origin” (404). “On every community image item, bad news created negative perceptions of the community and good news created significantly more positive perceptions of it” (Galician and Vestre 404). However, neutral segments, “which, by most standards, [are] not really news,” created a roughly equal perception to that of good news (Galician and Vestre 404).

For this reason, Christiane Eilders’s study titled “News Factors and News Decisions” indicates news factors as key variables in selecting a segment that will conceivably resonate through the audience. Her scholarly research was conducted to determine the characteristics of a newsworthy segment. News factors—“relevance, damage, elite-persons, continuity, proximity, and elite-nation... affect journalistic selection” (9). These elements, presented by Schulz in 1976, are “[content] characteristics that make [events] newsworthy,” providing for the “overall value of an event” (Eilders 6). Thus, a concept of “news value research” emerges, although this idea is not breakthrough; “[it] can be traced back to 1922, when Lippmann introduced sensationalism, proximity, relevance, unambiguity,

and facticity as attributes that lend news value to events” (Eilders 6). The aforementioned qualities serve both as selective criteria for the journalist as well as an attention director for the audience by “reduc[ing] complexity” and underscoring the “meaningful and potentially dangerous” (Eilders 16).

Hans Mathias Kepplinger and Simone Christine Ehmig further news decision findings in their scholarship “Predicting News Decisions: An Empirical Test of the Two-Component Theory of News Selection” by theoretically and empirically testing the “newsworthiness of news stories” to predict news decisions (36). Thus, they successfully determined that “news factors have different news values for different media outlets” and that for a given story, the apparent news factors and the extrapolated news value from these factors can be used to predict newsworthiness (Kepplinger and Ehmig 37). This “two-component theory of news selection” (Kepplinger and Ehmig 34) suggests that broadcasts do not classify as “non-random decisions;” (Kepplinger and Ehmig 26) instead, they are deliberately constructed based on the medium by which the segment will be conveyed and the significance that it will have on the audience.

Consistent with previous studies, Bertram Scheufele centers scholarship around the “psychological and sociological” criteria responsible for the methodical structuring of news stories in his research titled “Frames, Schemata, and News Reporting” (78). Instead of adapting coverage to support personal beliefs, “attitude-fitting,” “journalists prefer information that is consistent with their schemata or frames” (Scheufele 68). Defined, frames and schemata are “patterns of interpretations” which the reporter uses to portray reality (Scheufele

65). Scheufele concludes that the determined frames are “selected in accordance with the frames and schemata of the newsroom staff;” therefore, they are not “idiosyncratic” (79). Deeper analysis reveals that “framing reporting decisions always depend on prior decisions”—the reporter is bound by previous stories; the individual must conceptualize his segment with consistency to those already established by other newsroom staff.

Gabi Schaap, Karsten Renckstorf, and Fred Wester in their study “Conceptualizing Television News Interpretation by its Viewers: The Concept of Interpretive Complexity” move beyond the news selection process, whether stemming from news factors to reference groups, by regarding the audience’s “prominent role” in determining influential news: “watching news is ‘making meaning’” (Schaap, Renckstorf, and Wester 269). Here, viewer interpretation is of utmost importance; “the influence of television news on its audience is affected by the interpretation a viewer creates of the news” (Schaap, Renckstorf, and Wester 282). Structure outweighs content. “Interpretive complexity” results in differing representations for each viewer and refers to “the broadness and coherence of the interpretation of a television news item” (“differentiation” and “intergration” respectively) (Schaap, Renckstorf, and Wester 282). By allowing the viewer to “defin[e] what is right or true in the reception of a news item,” the report capably casts greater influence (Schaap, Renckstorf, and Wester 282).

Shawn J. Parry-Giles, stepping further from the newsworthy realm and into the modern question of the news’ role in image-making, explains in her 2000 article “Mediating Hillary Rodham Clinton: Television News Practices and

Image-Making in the Postmodern Age” that “mediation and [the] selectivity involved in production practices are virtually invisible” (219). This scholarship focuses on Hillary Clinton, “the way in which we “know” [her]...through mediated discourse,” but is a successful utilization of the power media demonstrates in overall image construction (206). With virtual images overpowering written ones, “moving pictures” represent “actuality” (Parry-Giles 210). However, these images undergo extensive selective processes “largely invisible to the uncritical viewer” (Parry-Giles 210). For example, NBC airs an emotional picture of Clinton from a “memorial service for...Americans killed in the Tanzania and Kenya Embassy bombings,” within the circumstances surrounding her husband’s affair (Parry-Giles 214). This practice of “recontextualization” (Parry-Giles 214) can be classified as “visual manipulation,” (Parry-Giles 214) making it increasingly more difficult for viewers to “discern the real from the simulated” (Parry-Giles 222).

Although the viewing audience is seemingly captive at the story creator’s discretion, Andrew Mendelson argues that human beings are “efficient processors of information” and therefore maintain some control regarding mediation’s power in his study titled “Effects of Novelty in News Photographs on Attention and Memory” (119). He determines that “novelty” news, “anything that breaks with expectations,” (122) has a strong initial effect but does not sustain interest or attention (128-129). “Studies have consistently shown that people look longer at novel or incongruous stimuli” (Mendelson 130) as well as “spend less mental effort on photographs that contain information they have seen before” (Mendelson

147). Focusing on “photographs of war, [President] Clinton, and [local] accidents,” Mendelson concludes that visual representations may be fashioned in such a way as to manipulate audience attention, but once the fundamental shock subsides, the power of the story vanishes (Mendelson 133).

Searching to maintain its exertion of control, the media is forced to “redesign...many publications,” an issue Pamela J. Shoemaker and James A. Fosdick confront in their article “How Varying Reproduction Methods Affects Response to Photographs” (13). Heading competition becomes essential as “graphic qualities” take precedent over “clarity and straightforward value” (Shoemaker and Fosdick 13). It is concluded that viewers favor “simple” photographs displayed “less realistic[ally];” meanwhile, “complex” photographs displayed “less realistic[ally]” were deemed “less exciting and less active” (Shoemaker and Fosdick 19). Consequently, “controversy and conflict” are more likely to appear televisually due to the audience’s disapproval of complex image reproduction. Controversy and conflict cannot be depicted simply in print, a preferred quality of viewers. This strategic toss-up between television and print is a direct result of viewer preference as well as the media’s attempt to sustain its power.

Although the media strives to cover news events in the most conducive format for viewers, Susanna H. Priest et al. prove in their study of a deadly train accident titled “Disaster Coverage Does Little to Promote Call for Change” that coverage of a catastrophe does not “foster advocacy for change” (52). A divide exists between officials/law enforcement and citizens/victims (Priest et al. 56).

Coverage, although it is “not mutually exclusive,” is either more heavily weighed on the official side (“hierarchy of credibility model”) or on the ordinary side (“open gate model”) (Priest et al. 56). This study concluded that disaster issues recount victims and citizens with “an emphasis on getting back to normal,” following, “expert interpretations...[were not] well served” (Priest et al. 61). Hence, causes and effects were overlooked and the media failed “to foster advocacy for change” (Priest et al. 61). When disasters emerge, “it is often journalists who first disseminate information,” yet media focuses on “internal operations,” such as “internet-based media” as opposed to “specific guidance on who to contact” (Priest et al. 54).

Because journalists are often the first to cover breaking situations, it is important that they exert their authority to do so. Barbie Zelizer, in her 1990 study of press coverage of John F. Kennedy’s assassination titled “Achieving Journalistic Authority Through Narrative”, studies “the role of journalists as storytellers” (366). She claims that journalists “adapt news events to an underlying narrative structure”—their bias—(Zelizer 366) using the devices of synecdoche, omission, and personalization, in order to “strengthen their authority in reporting” (Zelizer 373). Consequently, journalists are able to shape “the construction of the entire story,” as opposed to only “the level of the sentence” (Zelizer 373). By employing narrative tactics, journalists are able to enhance their control over their coverage of events.

Particularly, Alicia Shepard notes in her article “Preparing for Disaster”, that journalists “understand the importance of being prepared to mobilize *before*

the megastory breaks” (54). Here, journalistic authority is extended to preparation—steps that ensure a story will be properly executed. By “assessing past performances, then plugging in the holes,” the newsroom constantly details its plan of action for unexpected events (55). Shepard outlines the responses of various news sources from the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing to the Columbine shootings as well as September 11<sup>th</sup>. With “no time for reflection” during a catastrophe, overall plans are necessary in order to successfully deliver “Big Story coverage” (54).

Further, Gaye Tuchman examines the routinizing of these unexpected news events by classifying stories into “definitional categories” in her scholarship “Making News by Doing Work: Routinizing the Unexpected” (110). Disaster coverage, deemed as “spot news,” is largely dependant on the ability of the “newsmen...to create a stable social arrangement to anticipate them” (Tuchman 120). For instance, Tuchman notes that resources are both extended “(assigning a staff member to sit at the city desk all night)” and reallocated “(pulling a reporter off another story if and as necessary)” in order to ensure that if the unexpected occurs, newsmen can seamlessly shift from one story to the breaking one (120). Because the issue is previously organized by anticipating spot news, newsmen are able to “typify” unexpected events (“including emergencies and disaster”) and respond to them in a pre-determined manner based on an already established prediction of how “some events affect[t] the flow of news work (129).

Due to extensive journalistic forethought in approaching stories, Steve Barkin and Michael Gurevitch argue in “Out of Work and On the Air: Television

News of Unemployment” that television news “ought to be regarded not only...as a conveyor of information, but also, and perhaps more importantly, as a constructor of meanings” (1). By analyzing coverage of unemployment in the United States, their scholarship demonstrates that television news “rel[ies] on a narrative framework,” incorporating “dramatic unity” as well as “plot development” into the content of the stories (Barkin & Gurevitch 4). Significance arises as Barkin and Gurevitch conclude that the presence of themes in television news coverage far outweighs the presence of explanations (5). As a result, stories receive “narrative treatment” by first framing coverage and as a result, “promot[ing] particular audience understandings” (Barkin & Gurevitch 5).

Agreeing with Barkin and Gurevitch, Richard Vincent et al. focus on a narrative theory of news segments in their study “When Technology Fails”. Through examination of press coverage from four airplane crashes, research establishes that three narrative themes emerge: “tragic intervention of fate,” “the mystery of what caused the crash,” and “the work of...authority to restore normalcy” (Vincent et al. 357). All three “agree on media’s power to help guide the social construction of reality” (Vincent et al. 357). As a result, “stories communicate at both rational and emotional levels;” narrative elements are used by journalists in order to “increase the likelihood that viewers will attend to and learn from their descriptions” (Vincent et al. 358). Thus, coverage characterized as narrative seeks to connect with the audience, an action which Vincent et al. claims “offer[s] reassurance,” bringing closure to tragic events.

Despite the fact that coverage tactics remain situational, B. William Silcock discloses in “Every Edit Tells a Story” through scholarship on a “comparative analysis of...editor routines in global newsrooms” that televisual news broadcasts have national characteristics (3). “There were differences across the border;” (Silcock 8) but none more prevalent than the United States’ refusal of silence by rejecting pauses and instead “filling the gaps” with sound (Silcock 11). European countries have begun to conceptualize stories based on a words-first, pictures-last routine—an attribute traditionally assigned solely to American broadcasts, slightly reducing the international divide (Silcock 8-9). However, American news teams, unlike Europeans, are “influenced by the...need to achieve commercial success via higher ratings” (Silcock 10). In order to satisfy demand, this consequently results in expert editing and the most distinguishable American quality of “filling the gaps and avoiding silence” (Silcock 11). Overall, although newscast technology is constantly evolving, American coverage proves discernible from international stories.

A variety of studies have proven that newscasts are constructed on a range of factors in order to establish the newsworthiness of the segment. Further, conceptualization is conscious, the result of societal impacts that drive the story in a specifically determined direction. Coverage of the explosion of TWA Flight 800, The Station Nightclub fire, and the Minnesota bridge collapse demonstrate these scholarly conclusions and can be more entirely understood in conjunction with Walter Fisher’s narrative paradigm.

### **CHAPTER THREE**

#### **Breaking the Story, Here: The Narrative Paradigm**

In an attempt to explore human communication both more extensively and conclusively, Walter Fisher introduces his narrative paradigm in contrast to an existing rational world paradigm in his article “Narration as a Paradigm of Human Communication: The Case of Moral Public Argument” (Fisher, 1984, 4-6). Although he does not dismiss the latter, asserting that the two can “co-exist,” Fisher contends that the narrative paradigm “subsumes” previous conceptualizations of reality, thus yielding a greater comprehension of a particular, analyzed subject (1984, 3).

By the nature of Fisher’s narration, defined as “symbolic actions—words and/or deeds—that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them,” no prohibiting criteria exists, as explained in a follow-up article entitled “Narration as a Paradigm of Human Communication” (Fisher, 1987, 131). Education proves insignificant; as humans, the capabilities to live, create, and interpret are not qualified. “The narrative impulse is part of our very being because we acquire narrativity in the natural process of socialization” (Fisher, 1984, 8). Meaning is generated from “every detail” of life “for persons in particular and in general across...time and place” (Fisher, 1984, 8). This generational transcendence accredits narrative’s pervasiveness and constant utilization by society. “Narratives enable us to understand the actions of others because...we understand our own lives in terms of narratives” (Fisher, 1984, 8).

Due to narrative's undeniable presence, Rybacki and Rybacki note in their article "The Narrative Approach" that "Fisher suggests that it is in our nature as humans to use stories to get at the truth" (Rybacki and Rybacki 108). The narrative perspective centers around two divergent characteristics, encompassing "the argumentative, persuasive theme" with the "literary, aesthetic theme" into a single, overarching representation (Fisher, 1987, 132). A combination of both the argumentative and the literary "expands their meanings, recognizing their potential presence in all forms of human communication" (Fisher, 1987, 132).

The dual nature of narrative's foundation provides an assessment of truth that is doubly legitimized by argument and aesthetics. A determination of validity presents itself as the ultimate purpose of examining rhetorical situations through narrative. Fisher proposes the principles of narrative probability and narrative fidelity as the final judges of an achieved or failed truth according to audience perception. Narrative probability is responsible for determining if "a coherent story" is expressed; narrative fidelity for "whether or not the stories...ring true with stories [known] to be true" (Fisher, 1987, 133). Together, narrative probability and narrative fidelity consist of the overall narrative rationality, establishing if the narrative "offers a complete and plausible depiction of reality...a source of good reason" (Rybacki and Rybacki, 119). Five elements are highlighted in analyzing the "truth standard: factualness, relevance, consequence, consistency, and transcendent issues" (Rybacki and Rybacki, 121). The "aesthetic standard" relates to "how the story [is] told" and whether "plot

development, characterization, and setting” aid in delivering a truthful societal portrayal (Rybacki and Rybacki, 122).

Although the truth standard is comprised of various aspects, only factualness and relevance will be analyzed regarding CNN’s Evening News coverage. These two aspects, when posed as questions, “test narrative rationality” (Rybacki and Rybacki 119). Further, “the goodness of the reasons offered in any story can be measured in terms of [questions of fact and questions of relevance]” (Rybacki and Rybacki 119). Fisher specifically approaches fact by asking “what are the implicit and explicit values in the rhetorical act?” (Rybacki and Rybacki 119). Likewise, for relevance, the questions of “message appropriate[ness]” and “omi[ssion], distort[ion], and, [misrepresentation]” of the presented values are questioned (Rybacki and Rybacki 119). All three aesthetic standards will be evaluated: plot development, characterization, and setting. Plot exposes “an existing state of affairs,” usually “involv[ing] some degree of crisis and conflict” (Rybacki and Rybacki 113). “Central to storytelling” is characterization—the effectiveness of the story “depends on its characters,” especially “their motives and behavior” (Rybacki and Rybacki 115). Lastly, setting, a composite of “any number of temporal and physical” locations influences “the mood, tone, and emotional content of a narrative” (Rybacki and Rybacki 116-117). These selected truth and aesthetic requirements provide insight to the effectiveness of CNN’s news coverage of the surveyed segments. Initial aesthetic power declines as truth fails to deliver the strength needed to maintain audience attention and concern.

**CHAPTER FOUR**  
**Going Undercover:**  
**An Investigation of TWA Flight 800's Explosion**

*Reporting from the Scene: East Moriches, New York*

In a few words, the July 17, 1996 Trans World Atlantic Flight 800 “was brief” (Fiorino). The Boeing 747-131 plunged about 17,000 feet into the Atlantic Ocean just twelve minutes after takeoff from New York’s John F. Kennedy Airport (Hosenball & Van Boven). Likened to a “fireball,” the plane “exploded in midair,” killing all 229 people on board, before crashing into the waters off Moriches Inlet, Long Island (Marshall & Field). Destined for Paris’ Charles de Gaulle Airport, Flight 800’s fate remained the source of speculation for some time, a “probable cause” was not conclusively reached by the National Transportation Security Board (NTSB) until “four years and 40 million [dollars]” later (Fiorino).

Without “any transmission from the crew” prior to the crash, TWA, the NTSB, the FBI, and the Federal Aviation Administration stressed that the cause of the accident would not be determined until facts emerged (Marshall & Field). All that was indicated was that the unfolding event “was a catastrophic occurrence” (Marshall & Field). At a 12:45 a.m. press conference, four hours post tragedy, New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani noted it was “much too early” to discuss the source of the explosion, but insured that an investigation was underway (Phillips).

However, although “no specific threats [had been made] against TWA or the flight,” bomb conspiracies quickly materialized (Marshall & Field). “The State Department said it ha[d] no reason to believe that terrorism was involved,”

yet did not rule out the possibility of a bomb completely: “the aircraft’s previous departure point,” Athens, was quoted as being “known as a base for terrorists” (Phillips). Six months later, the bomb theory, neither proven nor disproven, was just another one among three dominant speculations as to the crash’s cause. As of January 1997, the NTSB reported that investigators were still unable to determine “if a bomb, missile or mechanical failure caused the center fuel tank on TWA Flight 800 to burst apart” (Brelis). Using a “full-scale blueprint of the 747,” the plane was slowly reconstructed by the reassembly of recovered debris in an attempt to solve what NTSB member, John Goglia, called “the world’s largest jigsaw puzzle” (Brelis). With “one missing pump from the center fuel tank,” the potential ignition source, the investigation remained incomplete.

By December of the same year, the CIA “presented a video re-enactment of the plane’s last 49 seconds” in an attempt to disprove the missile conspiracy, despite the conclusion of criminal investigations (Hosenball & Van Boven). A streak of light, noted by several witnesses, was claimed to have been seen “arching across the sky toward what they thought was a plane moments before a giant explosion” (Hosenball & Van Boven). Investigators posed that the initial explosion, occurring in the center fuel tank, “sheared off the nose of the plane,” causing the passenger section to “shoot sharply upward.” As the back portion of the plane climbed over 4,000 feet (and the nose plummeted to the Atlantic), it burned—this action, the CIA claimed, resulted in the “streak many witnesses mist[ook] for a missile” (Hosenball & Van Boven). Within 49 seconds, the rest of the plane “hi[t] water” (Hosenball & Van Boven).

Upon Flight 800's ten-year anniversary, "time [had] not brought full closure—not for the families of the victims, not for air travelers, not for industry" (Fiorino). However, the NTSB strongly stated that "it is likely that wiring in the fuel quantity indication system caused a short circuit...[resulting in] an explosion of flammable vapors in the center wing fuel tank" (Fiorino). An analysis of "radar returns" proved that TWA's position was never intersected and therefore ruled out previous bomb and missile conspiracy hypotheses (Fiorino). From this, the NTSB released safety recommendations; the FAA "responded [by] issuing 100 airworthiness directives since 1996 aimed at reducing fuel tank explosions" (Fiorino). In addition, the FAA passed the Special Federal Aviation Regulation (SFAR 88), eliminating "some 200 [sources of ignition]," affecting the way "aircraft are designed, operated, and maintained" (Fiorino). In an attempt to "close the book on fuel tank explosions," the FAA, along with the NTSB and the rest of the industry, were left to propose a "rule that is fair, balanced and feasible for industry compliance" (Fiorino). In July 2008, twelve years after the disaster, the final requirement emerged: all planes must contain "a system of injecting inert gas into fuel tanks—" a device characterized as being able to have "prevented the TWA tragedy" (Newsday, 2008).

Although coverage of Flight 800's explosion has continued to present itself years later, exposure of the event primarily occurred in the dates surrounding the catastrophe. The LexisNexis Academic database, providing results from credible and established sources, produced the maximum amount (1,000) of major U.S. and world publications relating to TWA's crash from July

17, 1996 – August 17, 1996. However, when limited to the previous two years, the database yields only 88 results. Despite the fact that reports have drastically declined with time, it is evident that the amount of coverage on this tragedy is extensive, warranting further investigation of the topic.

*The Faux-Setting Factor: July 18, 1996*

On the night following TWA Flight 800's midair explosion, CNN devotes the majority of its Evening "World View" segment to coverage of the tragedy, leaving just 70 seconds at the end of the broadcast to touch on international issues in both Israel and Bosnia (CNN Evening News, July 18). Fiona Foster and Judy Woodruff present the story in studio from London and Atlanta respectively. Inter-studio transitions frequently occur—the sole sense of movement in a fairly stagnant story. Summary shifts to interviews with President Clinton and Governor Pataki, to footage of JFK airport in New York City and Charles de Gaulle in Paris (CNN Evening News, July 18). Marc Watts reports live from Montoursville, Pennsylvania, home to sixteen teenagers who had lost their lives headed to Paris on a school-sponsored trip (CNN Evening News, July 18). Periodically, Bernard Shaw is pictured on scene in East Moriches, New York [See Figure 1] (CNN Evening News, July 18). The investigators' quest for truth is paralleled by CNN's constant changes in location, both resulting from a lack of conclusive evidence.

Figure 1<sup>1</sup>:

July 18, 1996

Begin Time: 05:00:10 pm; End time: 05:56:30 pm; Program Duration: 56.5 minutes

(Studio: Fiona Foster) Report introduced.
(Studio: Judy Woodruff) Summary of what is known about the explosion of TWA Flight 800, which crashed into the Atlantic Ocean, off Long Island, last night, presented; scenes shown.
(East Moriches, New York: Bernard Shaw) Interview held with Coast Guard Admiral John Linnon about the operation at sea; scenes shown of plane parts at sea. [LINNON - says whatever is out there on the water is being recovered.]
(Studio: Judy Woodruff) Report introduced.
(White House: Wolf Blitzer) Urging from President Clinton and his cabinet, including Secretary of Transportation Federico Pena, not to speculate about the cause of the plane crash reported; the crash of Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown's plane recalled. [At a White House ceremony for youth, CLINTON - asks for a moment of silence for the students and other victims.] [Earlier, CLINTON - says we do not know what caused the tragedy.] [Attorney General Janet RENO, House chaplain Reverend James David FROST - comment.]
(East Moriches, New York: Bernard Shaw) Interview held with New York Governor George Pataki about the plane crash. [PATAKI - acknowledges the families' grief; points out that the FBI is treating this as a potential crime scene; expresses disappointment about TWA's handling of this incident.]
(Studio: Fiona Foster) The reaction of world leaders to the crash of TWA Flight 800 outlined; words from French President Jacques Chirac to President Clinton quoted and messages from around the world summed up.
(Paris: Bill Delaney) The mood and security at Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris for which Flight 800 was bound noted.
(Paris: Richard Blystone) The reaction of friends and relatives to the plane crash featured; scenes shown from the airport. [SOS Terrorisme Francoise RUDETZKI - comments on acceptance of death.] [At the airport, two TRAVELLERS - comment.]
(Paris: Bill Delaney; Studio: Fiona Foster, Judy Woodruff) Report introduced.
(Pentagon: Jeanne Meserve) Help from the Navy in using its sonar to recover flight data recorders from the downed plane featured. [Pentagon spokesman Ken BACON - comments on the intelligence community's operations to find out if it was a terrorist act.]
[Presidential candidate Bob DOLE - speaks about the crash.]
(Studio: Judy Woodruff) Report introduced.
(Montoursville, Pennsylvania: Marc Watts) The deaths of 21 people (16 students and five chaperons bound for France) from Montoursville, Pennsylvania, featured; scenes shown from this small town's high school. [High school student Heather SCARBOROUGH, Principal Daniel CHANDLER, counselor J.C. COLLINS, superintendent Daniel BLACK, student Liz WEBSTER, residents John BRANDT, Renee ROBBINS - react to the town's loss.]
(Studio: Fiona Foster) The latest developments in the crash of Trans World Airlines, Inc. (TWA) Flight 800 outlined; scenes shown of the recovered bodies brought to Suffolk County, New York.
(Studio: Judy Woodruff) Reporter introduced.
(East Moriches, New York: Bernard Shaw) The recovery of plane pieces noted.
(East Moriches: Christine Negroni) Report on the reaction of members of the Air National Guard to the catastrophe presented while plane parts at sea are shown.
(East Moriches, New York: Bernard Shaw) Report introduced.
(JFK Airport: Jeanne Moos) The gathering of the families of the victims at the New York airport, TWA's presentation of a list of flight casualties and an NTSB briefing plan for the families reported. [New York City Mayor Rudolph GIULIANI - answers press questions about the families

<sup>1</sup> Vanderbilt University, CNN Evening News for Thursday, July 18, 1996

and the passenger list.] [Friend of victim Nancy COPOZZA - talks about their French exchange student.]
(East Moriches, New York: Bernard Shaw) The search operation updated.
(Studio: Fiona Foster) The Transportation Department's concerns about security at the Athens, Greece, airport from which the Trans World Airlines, Inc. (TWA) plane departed reviewed. [Athens aviation security Takis TASSOPOULOS - comments.] The explosion of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, on December 21, 1988, recalled. [Via telephone, former Pan Am chief pilot Bill FRISBIE - explains the nature of investigations of plane explosions based on his experience with the Lockerbie accident; lists telltale signs of a bomb.]
(Studio: Judy Woodruff) Report introduced.
(Washington: John Holliman) The issue of airport security examined in light of the crash of Trans World Airlines, Inc. (TWA) Flight 800 featured. [Former ambassador-at-large for counter terrorism L. Paul BRIMER - says if this is a terrorist event, security regulations will have to be reviewed.] The question of security safety at the Athens, Greece, airport mentioned. [International Airline Passengers Association Marty SALFEN - cites the cost of upgrading security technology.] [Two TRAVELLERS, former deputy attorney general George TERWILLIGER - comment on inconvenience at the airport from security screening.]
(Studio: Judy Woodruff) Interview held with French ambassador to the US Francois Bujon de l'Estang about French nationals on the flight. [l'ESTANG - says around 40 French people were on Trans World Airlines, Inc. (TWA) Flight 800 and their families have been informed.]
Studio: Judy Woodruff) Associated Press report of TWA's revised estimate of the number of passengers on Flight 800, which exploded and crashed, noted.

Twenty-four hours post-crash, no expectation exists that any survivors will be found. Instead, Judy Woodruff describes that “search crews spent the day recovering bodies and evidence off the calm waters of Long Island, New York (CNN Evening News, July 18). Since the initial explosion, the plot remains fixed in a stage of recovery. Bypassing any rescue efforts due to an impossibility of survival, hope never establishes itself as a driving factor of coverage. From onset, CNN describes the “grim” situation; it is apparent that recovery only extends as far as dead bodies and wreckage (CNN Evening News, July 18). Coast Guard Admiral John Linnon attests to the quick response of his crews, highlighting that the first body was recovered just 29 minutes after the explosion (CNN Evening News, July 18). Although 140 bodies and 70% of the plane have since been located and removed from the Atlantic, obvious strides for the investigation, the plot does not progress (CNN Evening News, July 18). Whereas recovery of a loved one’s body usually brings closure, this effect does not translate itself the same way to CNN’s audience as a whole. Instead, viewers are still searching for truth as plot gives them a futile ground for finding it.

Despite the plot’s invariability, the segment’s setting is in constant flux. CNN’s anchors are dispersed internationally, from London and Paris to Atlanta, Washington D.C., Montoursville, New York City, and East Moriches. Throughout the 56 minutes of coverage devoted to Flight 800, setting changes 22 times. The initial summary given by Judy Woodruff within the first minutes of the newscast is added upon by Bernard Shaw’s interviews with Coast Guard personnel and Governor of New York, George Pataki (CNN Evening News, July

18). Fiona Foster, summarizing the data collected by both, presents the “latest developments;” a blood red screen in bulleted format notes the three most important facts uncovered thus far: “no non-routine communications from the cockpit, no indications of any problems, and no maintenance record problems with this Boeing 747-100” (CNN Evening News, July 18). Although on the surface it appears that CNN is discovering new information as it switches locations, the following anchor simply recaps what the previous anchor delivers. Foster’s “latest developments” are merely a reproduction of the report given by Shaw (a slightly more detailed presentation than the one originally stated by Woodruff at the segment’s start) (CNN Evening News, July 18). These rapid exchanges fail to be progressive, but rather serve as a way to enhance the same information in front of a different, voice, face, and background.

Arguably, it is the crash scene itself—East Moriches, Long Island—which provides the most interest as well as the most information for viewers. Consequently, an essential question is begged: Why then are Fiona Foster, based in London, and Judy Woodruff, based in Atlanta, delivering such large sections of the coverage? It is doubtful that Bernard Shaw is unable to front the task himself from East Moriches; instead, the answer stems directly from the nature of the crash. With a depth of 110-120 feet, the Atlantic swallowed the tragedy. The victims and the wreckage lay below the ocean’s surface, invisible to CNN’s camera and therefore hidden from the audience. Shaw comments that “the approaching sunset and the calm waters do not truly portray the grim search scene miles offshore” (CNN Evening News, July 18). The video pans across the

horizon; slow tides roll in methodically and peacefully. This juxtaposition between the destruction below and the tranquility above is too strong, too insensitive, too inappropriate to be the segment's steady setting. Following Shaw's headshot delivers the rest of his coverage, minimizing the calming effect of the East Moriches coastline (CNN Evening News, July 18). By varying its locations and not providing an emergent, single setting, CNN penetrates viewers by recasting the same inconclusive information while simultaneously reducing the incongruent emotions emitted from the site of the crash.

As demonstrated by the desolation of both plot and setting, no one aboard survived the flight's plunge. Because no passengers remain to recount the terror experienced and eye-witness testimonies prove fruitless in determining the cause of the explosion, characterization has an insufficient foundation. Although Jeanne Moos, reporting from outside JFK Airport, informs that TWA has released a "verified, finalized list" of all passengers aboard, the families of those victims are being "shielded from the press" inside a Ramada Hotel not far from where Moos is delivering her story (CNN Evening News, July 18). She notes that an "occasional glimpse" of the victims' families can be caught; however, she stresses what "little contact" she is able to have with them (CNN Evening News, July 18). Limited in its resources, CNN relies on the Pennsylvania town of Montoursville to provide characterization to its audience. Described as a town "hit hard by tragedy," Montoursville lost a total of 21 of its citizens in the TWA crash (CNN Evening News, July 18). Marc Watts reports from the high school, interviewing students and faculty about their reactions to the tragedy. Student Heather

Scarborough questions “How many friends did you lose when you were 15 years old?” (CNN Evening News, July 18). Automatically, the addressed audience forms a connection with the grieving girl. Through incorporation, the viewers are asked to relate to her situation—an unavoidable task given the void in her gaze and the genuineness of her pain. As students pass in small groups in the background, the normalcy of the town is apparent. Montoursville does not differ from any other community across the country. This tiny glimpse of characterization lends itself to relevance, another aspect of CNN’s narrative which receives unsubstantial support.

The tragedy of Montoursville transcends the geographic boundaries of the town, permeating American society as a whole. Montoursville, undeserving of the disaster inflicted upon it, could have easily been any other community. Searching for reasons as to how innocent lives could have been so effortlessly taken, CNN poses a question of national security (CNN Evening News, July 18). Although the word “accident” emerges as the main qualifier, Judy Woodruff adds that “[investigators] say that does not mean that they ruled out other possibilities including terrorism” (CNN Evening News, July 18). This allusion of terrorism constantly regenerates throughout the entire broadcast. Wreckage of Scotland’s Lockerbie disaster in 1988 is pictured; CNN shows The Pan Am flight, the victim of “foul play”, of terrorism, destroyed on the ground (CNN Evening News, July 18). The images resonate—comparable footage of TWA does not exist due to the plane’s water landing. Here, however, destruction cannot hide from the naked eye and the country identifies with the Lockerbie crash as if it is identical in cause

to Flight 800. Although CNN highlights that three explanations remain possible: “failure of the plane itself, a bomb, or something str[iking] the plane,” the bomb scenario is the most highly referenced. Fiona Foster indicates that Athens, Greece had recently been on a “list of unsafe airports,” expressing concern about the level of security from Flight 800’s previous departure point (CNN Evening News, July 18). Relevance mainly presents itself through terrorist activity, an issue pertinent to all Americans.

The coverage’s factualness embeds itself through the other factors of plot, setting, characterization, and relevance. The stagnant plot, coupled with the changing setting, signifies that few developments have been made within the 24 hours since the plane exploded. President Clinton urges the public “not to assume” that it knows what happened, noting that the classified information in possession of the government is “highly speculative” itself (CNN Evening News, July 18). Characterization serves as the segment’s central emotional appeal, lacking any facts other than the enormity of the unfolding tragedy. Relevance hints at a possible cause for the explosion but cannot ascertain the actual presence of a terrorist attack. Overall, setting seemingly drives CNN’s July 18, 1996 segment; however, below its surface, setting exerts no more force on the coverage and displays no more truth than any of the other narrative components.

*Truth-Driven Aesthetics: July 22, 1996*

Four days following CNN's initial airing of the explosion of TWA Flight 800, only 19 minutes is devoted to the story. "World News" opens with coverage of the crash but is interrupted at 11 minutes by "catastrophic flooding in Canada" (CNN Evening News, July 22). Relating to Flight 800 however, a shore-side tribute to the victims airs, instances of terrorism throughout the year are summarized, and investigators detect chemical residue on debris from the plane (CNN Evening News, July 22) [See Figure 2]. The plot, unwavering in CNN's July 18<sup>th</sup> segment, advances here. Simultaneously, setting, relevance, and factualness also progress.

Bernard Shaw, in studio from Washington D.C., welcomes viewers by stating that "divers off Long Island...have made significant finds" (CNN Evening News, July 22). On scene in East Moriches, Martin Savidge strengthens Shaw's claims; he also attests that although the day was one "of mourning," it could equally classify as "a day of discovery" (CNN Evening News, July 22). The NTSB relayed to CNN that they have discovered "a debris field...on the ocean floor...measuring three miles by four miles" (CNN Evening News, July 22). CNN broadcasts the NTSB's press conference, delivered by Vice Chairman Robert Francis, who concludes that he would "characterize [the discovery of the debris field] as a major finding" (CNN Evening News, July 22). Further, he highlights the significance of the breakthrough, noting that investigators "are starting to get significant parts of the fuselage" (CNN Evening News, July 22).

Figure 2  
 July 22, 1996  
 Program Duration: 54.2 minutes

Figure 2A<sup>2</sup>  
 Begin Time: 5:00:50 pm; End Time: 05:07:50 pm

(Studio: Bernard Shaw) Report introduced.
(East Moriches, New York: Martin Savidge) The discovery of the debris field from TWA Flight 800, which crashed after it exploded, on the ocean floor featured; scenes shown of the relatives of the victims gathering on the beach. [NTSB vice chairman Robert FRANCIS - calls this a major find.] Questions raised about the location of the black boxes noted.
(Studio: Judy Woodruff) CNN/Gallup poll findings on the public's belief that airlines are adequately protected from terrorism cited.
(Studio: Fionnuala Sweeney) Report introduced.
(London: Margaret Lowrie) The escalation of worldwide terrorism examined; scenes shown from the bombed-out airport in Lahore, Pakistan and from the recent series of Basque separatist bombings in Spain. [Terrorism expert Paul BEAVER - gives two reasons for the rise in terrorism; points out there is a worldwide network seeking out terrorists.] [Two British TOURISTS - comment.] Other targets of terrorism this year reviewed.
(Studio: Fionnuala Sweeney) The worldwide impact of the Trans World Airlines, Inc. (TWA) downing reviewed; scenes shown from the airport in Seoul, South Korea.

Figure 2B<sup>3</sup>  
 Begin Time: 5:13:40 pm; End Time: 05:16:40 pm

(Studio: Bernard Shaw) Report introduced.
(New York: Charles Feldman) Word that field detection equipment has found a chemical residue indicating an explosive device on some parts from the downed Trans World Airlines, Inc. (TWA) Flight 800 reported.

Figure 2C<sup>4</sup>  
 Begin Time: 05:30:40 pm; End Time: 05:34:30

(Studio: Bernard Shaw) The latest developments in the search for parts from Trans World Airlines, Inc. (TWA) Flight 800 recapped; scenes shown from Brookhaven, New York, of the gathering of the victims' relatives. [New York Governor George PATAKI, Senator Alfonse D'AMATO, New York City Mayor Rudolph GIULIANI - speak to the mourners.] Promise from President Clinton for pathologists to help with the identification of bodies noted.
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Figure 2D<sup>5</sup>  
 Begin Time: 05:43:00 pm; End Time 05:45:50 pm

(Studio: Bernard Shaw) Charles Feldman's report that field detection equipment has found a chemical residue indicating an explosive device on the downed Trans World Airlines, Inc. (TWA) Flight 800 recapped. [By telephone, explosives expert Chris RONAY - assesses these preliminary findings as reported.]
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<sup>2</sup> Vanderbilt University, CNN Evening News for Monday, Jul 22, 1996 (Section 1)

<sup>3</sup> Vanderbilt University, CNN Evening News for Monday, Jul 22, 1996 (Section 2)

<sup>4</sup> Vanderbilt University, CNN Evening News for Monday, Jul 22, 1996 (Section 3)

<sup>5</sup> Vanderbilt University, CNN Evening News for Monday, Jul 22, 1996 (Section 4)

As a result, unsupported theories will begin to transform into legitimate resolutions. Although conclusions do not yet emerge, groundwork and logic present themselves through these new findings.

Less than thirteen minutes following the debris field update, Bernard Shaw introduces more breaking coverage, which is delivered from the studio in New York by Charles Feldman. Feldman highlights that “well-placed sources” have indicated that “using field level equipment, investigators have now detected...chemical residue...on the wing tip section...near what would have been the baggage compartment” (CNN Evening News, July 22). The plot leaps—chemical residue “strongly indicates...the presence of an explosive device” (CNN Evening News, July 22). CNN’s terrorism speculations seem to have been affirmed; however, Feldman continues on to say that he “should point out” that this evidence “is not considered conclusive” (CNN Evening News, July 22). Despite the indefiniteness, terrorist activity is substantiated just enough to advance the plot in a specified direction, away from mere hypothesis and on toward a cause. Within 15 minutes, the plot progresses twice; CNN’s audience receives not only updated information, but also a reason to continue relying on the segment for the truth behind the tragedy.

Plot and setting sustain their direct correlation in July 22<sup>nd</sup>’s coverage of the crash just as they did in the aforementioned segment. Although previously a steady plot signaled a changing setting, this time, an advancing plot indicates a more stable setting. Inter-studio transitions occur 9 times throughout the 19 minutes of coverage, yet now they are made more purposefully. Bernard Shaw

shifts to Charles Feldman because he possesses the most qualified data relating to the discovery of chemical residue. Whereas before, anchors were simply restating what had already been delivered, the plot's progress here allows for logical transitions. Now, setting represents the fluid presentation of fact.

Further, CNN again pictures the coast of East Moriches. The unnaturally calm water four days prior is now met with grieving families at a seaside memorial service for the passengers who perished when Flight 800 exploded. The scene is no longer tranquil; instead, it is distressing. Martin Savidge declares that it is the "most poignant and most difficult thing to watch," as families "literally [are] all drawn to the water," not bothering to hold up dresses or roll up pants to prevent them from getting wet (CNN Evening News, July 22). A lifeboat is used to "carry flowers out to the area of the crash site," the "nobility" and the "significance" of "that very vessel" noted (CNN Evening News, July 22). Taps sounds, followed by a military flyover to the tune of "Amazing Grace" (CNN Evening News, July 22). As families hug and cry, the sole suggestion of characterization throughout the entire segment, they are simply given an opportunity to "say farewell" (CNN Evening News, July 22). Mayor Giuliani, addressing the families and the state of New York and beyond stresses the "230 personal tragedies that the world shares with [those grieving] today" (CNN Evening News, July 22). Here, setting stimulates relevance, characterizing the public as a whole just before Fionnuala Sweeney, in studio from London, reinvigorates terrorist speculations.

In just under a four minute presentation of the latest instances of international acts of terrorism, CNN stresses that “terrorism appears to be on the upswing,” establishing that the explanation for the downed TWA Flight 800 jet “seems to be disturbingly clear” (CNN Evening News, July 22). “Citizen targets” lie immobile on beds in an overcrowded and inadequately furnished Pakistani hospital after a bomb exploded in a airport there over the weekend (CNN Evening News, July 22). A Spanish airport and area “holiday hotels” were also the recent victims of terrorist activity (CNN Evening News, July 22). Margaret Lowrie, delivering the review, comments “wherever there are tourists, there seem to be terrorists too” (CNN Evening News, July 22). CNN fashions a strong connection between tourists and terrorists, suggesting both the urgency and the extent of the circumstances—an immediate threat to all American lives. In an interview, terrorism expert Paul Beaver states that “terrorism will be with us for the foreseeable future,” despite any “international controls” on “guns and explosives;” anything “creat[ed] in terms of controls can always be bypassed” (CNN Evening News, July 22). Here, CNN legitimizes its position further. It demonstrates that it is not simply the news station that finds terrorism pressing, but in fact, experts themselves are convinced of the imminent threat of terrorism.

Seemingly contradictory to both CNN’s and Beaver’s assertions, Judy Woodruff presents the results of a terrorism poll conducted by the Gallup Organization (CNN Evening News, July 22). Even “despite fresh concerns raised by the TWA explosion, a solid majority of Americans, 68%, believe that airlines are adequately protected from terrorism” (CNN Evening News, July 22). Further,

and even more surprising, Americans were found “far more likely to fear mechanical problems on a commercial plane than terrorist attacks;” 80% indicated their fear of mechanical problems—only 11% highlighted terrorist attacks (CNN Evening News, July 22). As a result of these findings, it appears that a sample of “1,000 American adults” thoroughly rejects CNN’s terrorist scenario (CNN Evening News, July 22). However, this does not dismiss relevance altogether; Americans continue to express fear, whether it is manifested as mechanical or terrorist, forcing citizens to find truth within CNN’s coverage in order to ease their uncertainties about the cause of the catastrophe.

Again, as in the July 18<sup>th</sup> segment, fact develops within the four remaining narrative factors. Significant finds for the investigation advance the plot and display a more established setting. CNN summarizes the effect of the new breakthroughs: “for investigators, progress...for grieving families, a measure of comfort” (CNN Evening News, July 22). For the first time in the five days since the crash, hope surfaces. As a result of the discovery of the debris field, the Navy has sent an extremely technical “underwater robot” which “now has a job to do;” explanations appear to be pending (CNN Evening News, July 22). Although characterization remains absent from the coverage, relevance is strongly portrayed. Americans express a collective fear for the situation; the root of their concerns proves immaterial so long as the anxiety persists. On July 22<sup>nd</sup>, CNN delivers fact—the plot advances and the setting grounds, providing viewers with not just partial truth, but a more substantiated reason to continue following its narrative.

*Relevance's Burden in a Weak Narrative: July 26, 1996*

Although coverage of Flight 800's tragic crash still airs on CNN's evening news, only 8 minutes are dedicated to the story. The segment opens with footage of an airplane hijacking in Miami, followed by TWA's explosion at the five minute mark. From the studio in Washington, Bernard Shaw heads coverage. Martin Savidge, still on scene in East Moriches, presents the bulk of TWA related information, and Charles Bierbauer concludes the segment from Washington (CNN Evening News, July 26) [See Figure 3]. CNN's narrative experiences dramatic retardation as each factor declines in influence, largely due to the absence of additional discoveries.

Upon completion of yet another conference held by the NTSB, Savidge relays that "there is nothing of major consequence that we have learned" (CNN Evening News, July 26). Instead, details are filled in to an already established fact pattern. Analysis of flight data recorders and cockpit voice recorders indicate that the flight had been "operating normally;" the plane had been stable, making no atypical maneuvers (CNN Evening News, July 26). Particularly, all recovered recordings end without "anomalies," with the exception of the final "split second" sound captured: "a loud abrupt noise" (CNN Evening News, July 26). However, the presence of this blast cannot alone reveal terrorist activity. FBI agent James Kallstrom, evidently foreseeing reactions to the discovery of a bomb-like sound on the flight's records, informs the nation that the government is "not playing a semantic game," and that doubt still exists as to the cause of the explosion (CNN

Figure 3<sup>6</sup>  
 July 26, 1996

Begin Time: 05:05:00 pm; End Time: 05:12:50 pm; Program Duration: 27.2 minutes

(Studio: Bernard Shaw) Report introduced.
(East Moriches: Martin Savidge) Growing evidence indicating the crash of TWA Flight was the result of an explosive device, reported; details given. The clues that may be learned from the plane's wreckage and witness testimony outlined. [NTSB Robert FRANCIS, FBI James KALLSTROM - comment on the latest information.]
(Studio: Bernard Shaw) Report introduced.
(Washington: Charles Bierbauer) The tightening of security at United States airports featured; details given of the medical cargo and other items shipped on passenger planes. [Natl. Cargo Security Council Ed BADOLATO - talks about access to the cargo hold.] [Senator Kay Bailey HUTCHINSON - comments.]

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<sup>6</sup> Vanderbilt University, CNN Evening News for Friday, Jul 26, 1996

Evening News, July 26). Specifically, “circumstantial evidence [still] points to [the] different three scenarios:” mechanical failure, a bomb, or an outside object striking the plane (CNN Evening News, July 26). Releasing no new data, CNN regresses to providing viewers with prior findings. The plot, ceasing to advance, does not elicit any more truth than it did in days previous—CNN’s narrative begins to stagnate.

Consequently, while the plot steadies, setting’s narrative influence also diminishes. Video pans from Bernard Shaw’s headshot in Washington, to Martin Savidge’s in East Moriches and then on to Charles Bierbauer’s in Washington as well (CNN Evening News, July 26). The scene no longer contains the ability to emotionally overpower the audience; the flowers, a fleeting tribute to Flight 800’s victims, strewn across the Atlantic’s surface on July 22<sup>nd</sup> have since disappeared. CNN resorts back to its initial format seen in its first airing of the tragedy. Although eight days have passed, the accident still bears an impact strong enough to focus CNN’s cameras on the anchors, instead of the calm waters of the crash site. As a result, the segment is depersonalized and even dispassionate. Facts are simply stated—“140 bodies have been found”—without characterizing the lives lost or those who have suffered (CNN Evening News, July 26). Prior, heartache, although never overstated, was usually suggested. Now, after just a week, emotion is removed—only logic remains. Aesthetic components lose their influence as CNN presses argumentative relevance toward its viewers once more.

Although there have been “no reports of major delays” in airports across the nation, CNN informs that “more security measures will be phased in” (CNN

Evening News, July 26). Arguably, this information proves beneficial to the audience; it heightens awareness and forewarns travelers of new procedures. In other words, despite the triviality of the information, they are nevertheless relevant. However, absent of aesthetic factors, relevance alone must propel CNN's narrative. As a result, the segment rehashes terrorist concerns despite the overall dismissal of it just four days before. Deemed last minute as "a lifeguard flight" due to the existence of "medical materials" on board intended for transplantation, Flight 800 received "special priority and clearance" prior to takeoff (CNN Evening News, July 26). From this information, Martin Savidge, evoking relevance, poses the essential rhetorical question: "With all that is known by the FBI, how come they cannot make the conclusion that everyone believes has already made, that it is a bomb?" (CNN Evening News, July 26). Following, Charles Bierbauer introduces another aspect to bombs aboard planes, disregarding baggage and instead outlining the cargo process. Cargo, switching hands upwards of five times before being loaded onto a commercial aircraft, is described as "hardly...secure" (CNN Evening News, July 26). A reporter from CNN affiliate WJLA "probed the cargo facility at Washington's Dulles airport," discovering a "cargo warehouse door ajar" (CNN Evening News, July 26). Bierbauer advises that "if a reporter could get in, anyone might" (CNN Evening News, July 26). Certainly these findings transcend the TWA tragedy from New York's JFK airport. However, CNN's final attempt to arouse concern from its audience ultimately fails as coverage in the days following this segment reduce to

simple updates Atlanta's Summer Olympic Games and subsequent bombing take precedent over Flight 800's explosion.

Relevance's inadequacy cannot substantiate plot and setting's inability to advance CNN's narrative any further. As a result of a lack of new fact, coverage loses influence and finally subsides to a new story, rich in the factors absent here. The explosion is taxed—there is nothing left to learn in the foreseeable future. By the nature of the crash, it will take investigators years to conclusively pinpoint what exactly caused Flight 800 to plummet on the evening of July 17<sup>th</sup>, 1996. When it is determined, the answer will most likely be broadcasted nationwide. However, severed from the context of the narrative, it is doubtful that this long-desired answer will have enough influence to overpower another tragedy's coverage.

**CHAPTER FIVE**  
**Going Undercover:**  
**An Investigation of The Station Nightclub Inferno**

*Reporting from the Scene: West Warwick, Rhode Island*

Marked as the “fourth-deadliest nightclub fire in U.S. history,” West Warwick, Rhode Island’s The Station nightclub burned to the ground on February 20, 2003, extinguishing the lives of 100 attendees and injuring almost 200 more (Farragher & Belkin). Captured on video, fans of the headliner band, Great White, “cheer[ed] with pumped fists and longneck bottles of beer as [the] lead singer...began his set” (Farragher & Belkin). On cue, unlicensed pyrotechnics “exploded on stage [and] almost immediately, flames licked acoustic material behind the stage and danced across the nightclub’s ceiling” (Farragher & Belkin). Mayhem ensued; within three minutes, the “wooden, one story building...was fully aflame” (Farragher & Belkin).

Over capacity and with potentially “legally inadequate” exits, The Station lacked a sprinkler system (Rowland). Although the fire alarms functioned correctly and fire extinguishers were available, these measures alone could not prevent the buildup of the twenty-five victim blockade of the club’s main exit and the obstruction of safety for other patrons (Farragher & Belkin). Once the blaze subsided, questions arose as club owners, Jeffrey and Michael Derderian, along with the band, Great White, entered a firestorm of litigation.

Initially, state fire code formulas surfaced. It was not clear if The Station classified as a Class B or Class C business—this distinction proved essential in figuring “the required number and width of exits based on occupancy, square footage, and the distance a patron must go to escape quickly” (Rowland). If The Station was characterized as a Class C business, maximum occupancy caps at 300 patrons; the club’s exits fulfilled Class C requirements. However, The Station’s Class C status was “based on ‘assumptions.’” (Rowland). The club “may actually have been a Class B facility with a capacity higher than 300 patrons, which would increase exit requirements” (Rowland). Other standards demanded obstruction-free exits; “witness statements and published schematics...indicated that a large speaker partially blocked the exit behind the stage” (Rowland). Although plagued with restrictions, The Station was also able to cite policy loopholes. For instance, “a ‘grandfather’ clause exempted older buildings from adherence when the state adopted sprinkler requirements in 1996” (Rowland). Additionally, pubs, according to state fire codes, are allowed to “transfer into live concert venues that attract audiences in the hundreds” without eliciting a sprinkler requirement (Rowland).

As a result of The Station catastrophe, legislative changes occurred in Rhode Island and Massachusetts. Just four months after the fire, “Rhode Island banned pyrotechnics at nightclubs and other spots and mandated sprinklers for many businesses” (Mello). Likewise, in the following year, Massachusetts mandated sprinkler systems to be required in “all bars and nightclubs with a capacity of 100 or more” (Mello).

In February 2006, one year after The Station ignited, Great White's tour manager, Daniel Biechele, responsible for the band's pyrotechnics, "pleaded guilty in state court...to 100 counts of involuntary manslaughter, admitting he did not have the required permit to light the pyrotechnics" (Saltzman). Although ordered to four years in prison, Biechele was released in March of 2008 on parole, serving only half of his sentence. The Derderians, owners of The Station, "pleaded no contest in September 2006 to 100 counts of involuntary manslaughter" (Saltzman). Michael received four years—Jeffrey: probation.

Although no price can be placed on the loss of human life, roughly \$175 million dollars from 70 defendants has been offered in lawsuits (Valencia). "[T]he state of Rhode Island and the town of West Warwick each agreed to pay \$20 million to victims, relatives and survivors" (Saltzman). In September 2008, Great White agreed to pay \$1 million (Valencia). Days later, the Derderians themselves, last to settle, "reached a tentative settlement of \$813,000" (Saltzman). Still to be distributed, the settlement money will hopefully serve as closure for the lives lost and the lessons learned on that tragic February night.

Due to extended legal proceedings, coverage of The Station's inferno resulted in a substantial amount of reporting in the media. A search of LexisNexis Academic provided 287 major U.S. and world publications within the previous two years centering on Rhode Island's fire. However, in the month surrounding the tragedy, the database yielded the maximum amount of results, 1,000, for publications relating to The Station. The story saturated not only printed news sources, but newswires and broadcasts alike.

*Argumentative Start, Aesthetic Finish: February 21, 2003*

Amidst heightened tensions between the United States and Iraq as well as the aftermath of space shuttle Columbia's breakup upon its re-entry into the Earth's atmosphere, CNN dedicates twenty-one minutes of its evening news coverage to a story both local and catastrophic in nature (CNN Evening News, February 21). Anderson Cooper introduces "an item in [a] Providence paper that caught [CNN's] eye;" namely, The Station Nightclub inferno which will ultimately claim the lives of 100 of its attendees (CNN Evening News, February 21). Emerging as the lead story, CNN initially allocates eighteen minutes to the fire, with two of its reporters, Bob Franken and Whitney Casey, on scene in West Warwick, Rhode Island. Cooper, in studio, directs the segment, returning to the topic for three minutes just over forty minutes into the program [See Figure 4]. Rich in fact, the story quickly develops, broadcasting live press conferences and breaking news as the evening progresses.

In the twenty-four hours since the blaze's outbreak, investigations have successfully collected material facts of the tragedy. CNN reports that "at least ninety-five people died" and "twenty-five [are] in critical condition" from an "estimated 360" whom were present when the flames first sparked (CNN Evening News, February 21). Constantly referencing an upcoming press conference to be given live by Rhode Island Governor Donald Carcieri, CNN anticipates the delivery of additional information. Here, a sense of urgency develops as both Franken and Cooper comment on this expectancy within seven minutes from the coverage's start; Cooper even advises viewers that "[they'll] want to be holding

## Figure 4

February 21, 2003

Program Duration: 55.3 minutes

Figure 4A<sup>7</sup>

Begin Time: 9:03:40 pm; End Time: 9:21:40 pm; Duration: 18:00 minutes

(Studio: Anderson Cooper) Report introduced.
(West Warwick: Bob Franken) The fire at The Station nightclub in West Warwick, Rhode Island, featured; scenes shown from inside the club & the fire & chaos outside. [WPRI photographer Brian BUTLER†, witness Erin PUCINO†, fire department Chief Charles HALL†- describe what happened.] [Governor Donald CARCIERI†- comments on the horrific situation.] [Great White lead singer Jack RUSSELL†- says we had permission for fireworks.] The disagreement between the band & the club over permission to use pyrotechnics discussed.
(Studio: Anderson Cooper) Report introduced.
(West Warwick: Whitney Casey) The community's reaction to the nightclub fire featured; scenes shown of family members asking for help about their missing loved ones. [Several PEOPLE - comment.] [Neighbor Nicole LaFLEUR†, Miss Rhode Island USA Christie LEE†- talk about the community.]
(Studio: Anderson Cooper) Live press conference by Rhode Island's governor presented. [CARCIERI†- talks about the effort by the fire department & at the hospitals; comments on securing the site & getting the bodies identified as fast as possible; notes other needs are being assessed & other older buildings will be inspected; states "pyrotechnic evidence" has been found.]
(Studio: Anderson Cooper) The governor's press conference reviewed.
(Studio: Anderson Cooper; West Warwick: Bob Franken) The slow unfolding nature of this fire story, the casualty figures & the astounding speed of the fire discussed.
(Studio: Anderson Cooper; West Warwick: Whitney Casey) The identification & grieving processes in West Warwick discussed.

Figure 4B<sup>8</sup>

Begin Time: 9:41:10 pm; End Time: 9:44:00 pm; Duration: 2:50 minutes

(Studio: Anderson Cooper) The story of the fire at The Station nightclub in West Warwick, Rhode Island, as told by a photographer who was inside presented; scenes shown from inside the club as the fire started & of the conflagration as filmed from outside. [Photographer Brian BUTLER†- describes the start of the fire & the reaction of people to the fire; outlines what he did when he got outside.]
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<sup>7</sup> Vanderbilt University, CNN Evening News for Friday, Feb 21, 2003 (Section 1)

<sup>8</sup> Vanderbilt University, CNN Evening News for Friday, Feb 21, 2003 (Section 2)

on for that” (CNN Evening News, February 21). CNN passes its reliance on the forthcoming news to its audience; just as CNN awaits the Governor’s speech, viewers await CNN’s broadcast. Already founded on verifiable evidence, the story will presumably advance. Cooper, interrupting Casey’s summary of her encounter with the families of the victims, directs attention to the breaking conference. From outside the nightclub in West Warwick, Carcieri simultaneously updates CNN and the audience on the investigation’s latest developments (CNN Evening News, February 21). He confirms that one more victim has been found dead, upping the total number of casualties to ninety-six, and informs that seven positive identifications of those ninety-six people have been made by families (CNN Evening News, February 21).

Not expressly emotional, the briefing continues to deliver that the White House has noted that the unfolding tragedy is “the fourth largest loss of life in a fire in U.S. history” (CNN Evening News, February 21). Forward-looking, the Governor outlines a plan of action: five forensic teams are “on the way” to work “twenty-four hours around the clock to identify bodies and give closure to the families” (CNN Evening News, February 21). Upon conclusion of the press conference, heavier in fact than emotion, CNN flashes the recently gained information as alternating captions underneath the headline of “Breaking News” (CNN Evening News, February 21). With essential figures accounted for, CNN turns ahead to the next issue. Cooper highlights that although “the fire is out [and] the club is gone, questions about how this all came to pass have just begun” (CNN Evening News, February 21). Fact, originally providing the most truth to CNN’s

audience, implicitly succumbs to larger concerns, eventually weakening its overall presence.

Contrary to the initial rate with which information about the inferno was first presented, plot reflects the stagnant future that fact faces. Cooper, remarking on the “astounding” pace in which the flames fully engulfed The Station (three minutes), notes that “the aftermath, of course, plays out at a different speed entirely” (CNN Evening News, February 21). True inquiry penetrates deeper than the surface. Charred bodies have been counted and removed from the site, but it is what is beneath the ash—a cause— which provides the ultimate answers to the audience’s questions. Franken, cognizant of the underlying circumstances, comments that the approaching investigations will be “unfolding slowly and unfolding sadly” (CNN Evening News, February 21). Locally, this realization has already infiltrated the city of West Warwick; Casey describes that the “atmosphere...today was just like nomads walking down the street” (CNN Evening News, February 21). Without the fire’s cause, the issue remains unresolved. Those directly afflicted are left to search for the truth themselves. Nationally, statistics on the lost, dead, and injured can only sustain viewers for so long before interest deteriorates due to a lack of relevance.

Perhaps neglected due to the influx of the preliminary facts of the investigation, relevance fails to provide any additional argumentative support for CNN’s narrative. In discussing Brian Butler’s story, a photographer for a local Providence television station who captured the tragedy on film from inside the club, relevance is at best alluded to. Ironically, Butler was shooting a segment on

nightclub safety following a recent inferno in Chicago. Although CNN does not explicitly highlight any connection between the two fires, it can be reasonably inferred that the issue may transcend the borders of just Rhode Island and Illinois. However, it remains at the discretion of the viewers whether the threat of public fires extends to them or simply restrains itself to those specified, isolated instances. CNN ultimately disregards a chance to incorporate its audience into their story, deemphasizing the coverage's narrative characteristics.

While relevance exerts minimal influence on the overall narrative, characterization adds aesthetic qualities. Whitney Casey, responsible for capturing the community's reaction, interviews several individuals, ranging from a frantic mother determined to find her daughter to Miss Rhode Island USA (CNN Evening News, February 21). The mother, short of breath, passes Casey as she proceeds down the middle of the street, her arms swinging as she propels herself toward her desired goal—finding her daughter. Slowing yet not completely stopping when Casey questions her about what she is going to do, the woman decisively comments “I’m going to find her. I’m going to find her” (CNN Evening News, February 21). As she turns away from the camera, she continues on her mission, managing a brief wave and a simple “see ya” (CNN Evening News, February 21). Although this exchange takes only seconds, it resonates with the audience. Displaying heart, hope, and urgency, viewers are able to connect emotion with statistic. Now, the “96” dead or the “25” critically injured are humanized, as opposed to being only numbers.

In contrast, Casey next speaks with Christie Lee, Miss Rhode Island USA. Grieving less visibly, Lee describes the enormity of the tragedy, explaining that the situation has transformed into a “waiting game,” an essential mystery of which of the victims are friends of hers (CNN Evening News, February 21). Another West Warwick resident, Nicole LaFleur, stresses small town atmosphere, expressing that if you’re not a relative of a victim, you are certain to know someone affected by the tragedy (CNN Evening News, February 21). The community is afflicted as a whole, either directly or indirectly; the fire didn’t discriminate as it extinguished the lives of the ninety-six victims in its path.

Advancing characterization, CNN devotes the latter portion of its coverage on The Station’s fire to Brian Butler, the photographer from its affiliate station WPRI. Through Butler’s video broadcasts, viewers can literally watch excitement turn to concern and further to panic. The camera is unsteady, filming the tops of people’s heads as it records inaudible shrieks. In one word, Butler’s video captures chaos. Outside, the juxtaposition of the flames against the night’s darkness enhances intensity as Butler’s voice competes with the screaming sirens in the background (CNN Evening News, February 21). Characterization proves powerful. CNN’s audience not only experiences the aftermath of the grief, but also the immediacy of the terror.

From Butler’s footage, setting establishes itself first amidst the flames and then among the ashes. Rarely is catastrophe recorded. Instead of simply imaging what Butler means when he describes that “smoke rolled down from the ceiling,” picture correlates with narration. This dually enforces the setting, enabling

viewers to more comprehensively understand the tragedy. Within the three minute segment dedicated to airing Butler's video, the audience witnesses the progression from the first sparks to the full inferno. Now, images of the charred structure are complete—the setting comes full cycle.

A narrative originally powered by fact is reinforced by characterization and setting. By strengthening its aesthetic elements, CNN is able to deliver a different truth to its audience. Although the cause of the fire still remains unanswered, the reality of the situation is a successful substitute. A national audience with little relevance to a local story attaches itself to the terror recorded in Butler's video. Decreasing argumentative characteristics appear less alarming due to the force of the narrative's aesthetic ones.

*Undermining Argument: February 24, 2003*

Four nights post tragedy and three since CNN first aired The Station's fiery end on "Evening News," thirteen minutes are dedicated to further narrative development. Still maintaining a lead story position, West Warwick, Rhode Island is formally mourning its dead and more fervently questioning the reason for the disaster that stole those lives. Bob Franken delivers coverage of an earlier memorial service, awaiting another live press conference from Governor Carcieri (CNN Evening News, February 24) [See Figure 5]. Inquiries regarding the cause of the fire weaken fact as CNN proves incapable of providing answers. Consequently, plot does not advance; the sought-after information remains seared

Figure 5  
 February 24, 2003  
 Program Duration: 56.0 minutes

Figure 5A<sup>9</sup>  
 Begin Time: 9:03:20 pm; End Time: 9:07:20 pm; Duration: 4:00 minutes

(Studio: Aaron Brown) Report introduced.
(West Warwick: Bob Franken) The investigation into the fire at The Station nightclub in West Warwick, Rhode Island, featured; scenes shown of the burned-out building. [In church, Rev. John HOLT†- leads memorial.] [State attorney general Patrick LYNCH†- hopes the owners will cooperate.] [Club owner Jeff DERDERIAN††- says we will cooperate.] [Great White attorney Ed McPHERSON†- says the club was told about pyrotechnics.] [Governor Don CARCIERI†- says we have asked for a declaration of disaster.] The problem of identifying the bodies discussed.

Figure 5B<sup>10</sup>  
 Begin Time: 9:35:20 pm; End Time: 9:44:30; Duration: 9:10 minutes

(Studio: Aaron Brown) Live coverage presented of the news conference by Rhode Island Governor Don Carcieri about the nightclub fire in West Warwick. [CARCIERI†- reviews the memorials for the victims & the grieving of the community & state; announces a relief fund for those impacted by the tragedy; states 23 of the 42 remaining victims have been identified; gives the number for a hotline to solicit tips in the investigation; responds to a question about missing persons reports.]
(Studio: Aaron Brown) The governor's press conference summed up.

<sup>9</sup> Vanderbilt University, CNN Evening News for Monday, Feb 24, 2003 (Section 1)

<sup>10</sup> Vanderbilt University, CNN Evening News for Monday, Feb 24, 2003 (Section 2)

in the embers of a tragedy arranged in an undecipherable mess on the grounds where the nightclub had stood just days before. Concern and uncertainty overwhelm the narrative—the remaining argumentative and aesthetic qualities are unable to surmount this detriment in order to deliver the truth demanded by CNN’s viewers.

Emblazoned across the bottom of the screen, CNN’s headline and accompanying caption read “Nightclub Inferno/Looking for Answers” (CNN Evening News, February 24). Although investigations are ongoing, striving to discover any evidence that will formidably enhance understanding of the tragedy, they have yet to find a break. Instead, goals are prolonged due to a lack of fact. From the studio, Aaron Brown describes the sentiment of West Warwick: “[the town] keeps asking again, and again, and again: Why? Why so many lives cut short?” (CNN Evening News, February 24). Arguably, this may be a question which will forever go unanswered, a mere plea of unjustified heartache. However, CNN poses another question concerning the inferno: “Rhode Island’s Attorney General want[s] to know why The Station’s owners [have] responded to questions about the fire to the press but not them” (CNN Evening News, February 24). Silently filmed walking into an apparent press conference, club owner Jeffrey Derderian “has maintained that management was unaware that the band, Great White, would use pyrotechnics” (CNN Evening News, February 24). Although this information results from unofficial investigations, Attorney General Patrick Lynch “remains hopeful that [the owners Jeffrey and Michael Derderian] will cooperate with law enforcement” (CNN

Evening News, February 24). However, it proves alarming that the owners are willing to connect with media, yet still decline to partner with authorities. Consequently, another question arises: what is the underlying reason for this delay? Deemed as one of the worst nightclub fires in American history, it seems plausible that the owners would aim to bring closure to a situation afflicting so many—unless, of course, the Derderians are masking a fault of their own. In this case, communication with the media is opportune, providing the owners with a chance to both appeal to and convince a vulnerable public of their innocence amidst accusations from the band’s attorney that they “knew of the pyrotechnic display” (CNN Evening News, February 24).

Unable to answer any of the emerging questions, CNN abandons these discrepancies, moving on to the rising tensions between the United States and Iraq. Brown, anticipating another live press conference from West Warwick, instructs that “we’re going to plow on here for a while, but when [Governor Carcieri]...steps up to the microphones, we’ll cut to that” (CNN Evening News, February 24). As promised, twenty-eight minutes later, CNN interrupts a segment on medical malpractice to deliver new fact. However, neither the audience nor CNN receive satisfactory answers to their queries; actions of the owners and the use of pyrotechnics are never discussed. Instead, Carcieri informs about a “fire relief fund,” acknowledging community efforts, commending them as “great” (CNN Evening News, February 24). Advancing to the investigation’s “progress since noon,” the Governor reduces victims to numbers. As it stands, “twenty-three more of the forty-two remaining” have been identified (CNN Evening News,

February 24). In short, Carcieri notes in succession that “we have nineteen left,” “hopefully by tomorrow, we’ll be able to get those nineteen,” and that “we’ll have a better feel on the last nineteen by tomorrow” (CNN Evening News, February 24). The investigation, it appears, seeks to win a numbers game, losing sight of the emotion embedded within the tragedy. Because it cannot determine the fire’s cause, the investigation prides itself on the progress it has made; this can alone be demonstrated by numbers: out of the ninety-seven dead, only nineteen have yet to be identified. Further, Carcieri introduces another question; namely, investigators have “more missing persons reports than bodies,” a phenomena which authorities cannot explain (CNN Evening News, February 24). Upon the conference’s conclusion, CNN returns immediately to another story, failing to resolve any of the factual inconsistencies presented throughout its evening news segment.

With a largely dissatisfied audience, CNN must make one last argumentative claim in order to salvage the segment’s narrative. At the story’s introduction, Aaron Brown does just that. He explicitly targets the viewers, explaining that the inferno in West Warwick “isn’t, of course, New York on 9/11. It is not a national tragedy. It does not have global impact” (CNN Evening News, February 24). He describes however, that “one comparison does hold true: an entire community was changed forever by a single, horrible event” (CNN Evening News, February 24). By highlighting the audience’s distance from the disaster, CNN is then able to underscore its proximity. Compared to other tragedies, The Station’s blaze does not appear to measure up in magnitude or consequence. Understanding this assumption, CNN attempts to illustrate that a correlation does

exist between the audience and the isolated victims of the fire. The emotional appeal concerns community, a concept familiar to all viewers nationwide. Although slight, this strategically placed allusion communicates relevance, the sole argumentative element in a narrative overpowered by questions and disparities.

Immediately following CNN's suggestion of relevance, footage of the previous night's memorial service broadcasts. Plot had remained fairly unchanged since the fire had been fully extinguished in days previous; this scene seamlessly moves the audience towards closure. Reverend John Holt invites the congregation to "hold up pictures of a loved one" (CNN Evening News, February 24). CNN's camera pulls away from the altar, exposing the entire church as its members simultaneously raise tribute to the victims. This perspective, although too broad to display detail, allows the audience to observe the extent of the tragedy. The plot makes an arguable final progression as the victims are honorably laid to rest.

Although the narrative aesthetically strengthens as a result of plot, characterization and setting exhibit insufficient influence. Briefly, CNN pictures aerial views of the fire's destruction. It remains undistinguishable if the scene is simply a demolition site or actually the location of the old The Station nightclub. Surrounded by dirt and debris, the location is absent of any true indications of a fire. However, this proves consistent with the very nature of an inferno—most evidence presents itself as ash, a substance so unsubstantial that it is able to be controlled by a weak wind. Inside views of The Station are as equally

undecipherable. Without the caption of “Nightclub Inferno,” it proves impossible to know what the picture actually represents (CNN Evening News, February 24). However, once coupled with the flowers, pictures, and yellow caution tape secured to the chain link fence surrounding the disaster site, setting gains basic clarity. Bob Franken delivers coverage from in front of this dedicational backdrop, subtly translating setting to the viewing audience. Characterization, on the other hand, dominant in coverage on February 21<sup>st</sup>, bears almost no power in this segment. CNN momentarily flashes a picture of Great White’s guitarist on screen, “one of the ones killed” as a result of the blaze (CNN Evening News, February 24). This fleeting reference to the life of a victim cannot alone maintain aesthetic power; consequently, characterization disregards narrative truth.

Overall, CNN’s narrative significantly diminishes by the conclusion of this Evening News broadcast. Its inability to answer prominent questions displays a factual struggle to deliver truth. The remaining narrative elements, relevance, plot, setting, and characterization unsuccessfully account for fact’s shortcomings. However, due to the excess of unanswered inquiries, the audience might continually rely on CNN to resolve these inconsistencies—a final opportunity for narrative development and a presentation of truth.

### *Surrendering the Narrative: February 26, 2003*

One night shy of the inferno’s one week anniversary, press coverage of the disaster has virtually disintegrated from the “Evening News” broadcast. CNN

deems sufficient a two minute and thirty second block in order to convey the consequences currently suffered by West Warwick. Aaron Brown leads the story, highlighting prominent sound bites from previous interviews and conferences. Bob Franken concludes the coverage live, for a final time, as tensions between the United States and Iraq reach alarming heights (CNN Evening News, February 26) [See Figure 6]. All narrative elements, both argumentative and aesthetic, surrender any of their remaining power without providing adequate truth; the audience is ultimately abandoned as a result of a new, emerging narrative.

Repeating formerly established fact, CNN fails to deliver the fire's cause. Ongoing analysis has unsuccessfully determined a probable explanation for the disaster; however, the grand jury investigation has officially commenced—its main goal: assigning accountability, a task which Brown comments “when all is said and done, could take years” (CNN Evening News, February 26). With answers absent from the foreseeable future, CNN is left to hypothesize. Attorney General Patrick Lynch hints at the club owners' guilt, the fire resulting from their negligence. CNN stresses that consistently, “the musicians have cooperated with investigations” (CNN Evening News, February 26). Further, “in contrast,” Franken notes, it is “the club owners who have now attained an additional lawyer” (CNN Evening News, February 26). Although the burden of proof remains with the prosecution in criminal suits, CNN's syntax reflects an opposite process. The Derderian's acquisition of another lawyer is viewed negatively—an indication of their guilt. In addition, CNN interviews Great White member Jack Russell,

## Figure 6

February 26, 2003

Program Duration: 54.8 minutes

Figure 6A<sup>11</sup>

Begin Time: 9:14:50 pm; End Time: 9:17:20 pm; Duration: 2:30 minutes

(Studio: Aaron Brown) Report introduced.
(West Warwick: Bob Franken) The grand jury investigation into the cause of the fire at the nightclub in West Warwick, Rhode Island, featured. [Great White band member Jack RUSSELL†, Derderian lawyer Jeffrey PINE†, state attorney general Patrick LYNCH†, Governor Don CARCIERI†- comment on the case.]

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<sup>11</sup> Vanderbilt University, CNN Evening News for Wednesday, Feb 26, 2003

characterized as “arriving first” to the grand jury proceedings (CNN Evening News, February 26). He is pictured both rubbing his eyes and shaking his head, a stark juxtaposition to Jeffrey Derderian’s later entrance into the courtroom (CNN Evening News, February 26). Dissimilarly, his eyes appear fixed and unemotional, avoiding the camera as he proceeds to his seat (CNN Evening News, February 26). In response to the owner’s actions, CNN informs that Lynch has used a word which “he has not used publically before”—“arrest” (CNN Evening News, February 26). Although CNN cannot provide any conclusive evidence concerning accountability, the segment attempts to stage fact. Instead, Brown refocuses on the irrefutable information that the investigations have discovered.

Returning to statistics, CNN reiterates that “[West Warwick] remembers ninety-seven” victims (CNN Evening News, February 26). However, it further advises that the public “keep another number in mind. The number is thirty-six—that is the number of people still in critical condition fighting for their lives tonight” (CNN Evening News, February 26). Reminiscent of February 24<sup>th</sup>’s coverage, CNN again preoccupies the audience with numbers, an apparent attempt to detract from the uncertainty of more consequential fact. Whether or not figures increase, decrease, or stagnate, the audience still demands a larger explanation for the inferno. Ultimately, CNN proves incapable of providing this information, depriving viewers of truth and therefore discrediting its narrative.

Just as fact materially depends on the grand jury’s investigation for accountability, the plot equally relies on the same determinations. Due to both a

lack of internal development and external emergent situations affecting the United States, Aaron Brown candidly admits that “the Rhode Island fire [is] something that has gotten a bit lost in the coverage” (CNN Evening News, February 26). Plot demonstrates predicted progress, actions that can hardly be viewed as legitimate advances: “family and loved ones begin to bury the dead” (CNN Evening News, February 26). Currently, “officials are still going through debris,” verifying that no other bodies remain on site (CNN Evening News, February 26). Most importantly, the plot is described as “*still* going,” a suggestion of monotony, of disinterest, and ultimately, unconcern. In short, CNN underscores that “the investigation grinds on” (CNN Evening News, February 26). Relief stems from the update that dogs have been “brought in...for a final search,” signaling a conclusion of investigations and a decisive termination of the narrative’s plot (CNN Evening News, February 26). Closing, Bob Franken notes that the present situation bears no importance; in fact, he remarks, “there’s a common feeling that the punishing of those responsible will be essential to the mourning process” (CNN Evening News, February 26). Plot, unable to convey this closure, succumbs to time, consequently extinguishing its narrative influence.

As plot diminishes, the remaining aesthetic elements also relinquish their power. Characterization is merely referenced in regard to fact; an interview with Great White’s Jack Russell delivers his emotion. He sincerely comments that the unfolding disaster has been “the most horrible experience of [his] life...the most horrible experience of [his] life” (CNN Evening News, February 26). Other than this repeated phrase, “there is nothing else [he] can say” (CNN Evening News,

February 26). The audience catches at best, a momentary glimpse of the inferno's repercussions. Aaron Brown also attempts to capture the aftermath's misery, noting that survivors face "the most painful kind of recovery, the recovery from burns." (CNN Evening News, February 26) The scars, he comments, will wound "for a lifetime" (CNN Evening News, February 26). However, as quickly as these descriptions are delivered, their effects disappear. Without development, these statements never materialize emotionally, an ultimate breakdown of characterization's narrative influence. Likewise, setting similarly unsuccessfully establishes emotional power. Coverage exists predominantly of press conferences, of authorities positioned behind podiums, evoking no sentiment aside from harsh indifference. However, in contrast, Franken delivers the final seconds of coverage outside of The Station's charred grounds—the surrounding chain linked fence is adorned with substantially more ribbons, flowers, and pictures than that of two days previous (CNN Evening News, February 26). Alone, this subtle depiction cannot prevail against the absence of other aesthetic characteristics as CNN finally salutes West Warwick, turning its camera away from the tragedy and onward to other surfacing issues.

As a result of this segment's coverage, the inferno is figuratively extinguished a second time. Fact surrenders as a result of inconclusiveness, plot due to underdevelopment. Characterization and setting fruitlessly attach emotion to the deteriorating circumstances. Relevance remains unmentioned. A narrative initially powered by aesthetics weakens due to factual inconsistency. In the end, CNN sacrifices this ineffective formulation, never fulfilling audience demands

before advancing to more compelling matters, flourishing in both arguments and aesthetics.

**CHAPTER SIX**  
**Going Undercover:**  
**An Investigation of the Minnesota Bridge Collapse**

*Reporting from the Scene: Minneapolis, Minnesota*

August 1, 2007 was proving to be a typical day for residents of the Twin Cities and the surrounding Minneapolis and Saint Paul areas. Afternoon rush-hour traffic was gridlocked on Minnesota's busiest I-35W bridge—all 458-feet of it which spanned the Mississippi River. Lanes were closed in both directions. Travel had slowed to ten miles per hour. However, at around 6:05 p.m., this 40-year old, eight-lane structure, carrying on average 141,000 vehicles daily, buckled at its center: “dozens of cars plummeted more than 60 feet into the...river” (Newsday, 2007). By dusk, authorities inconclusively determined the deaths of four along with countless injuries and twenty still missing; rescue efforts “switched...to recovery” (Kimball & Williamson).

Information began to materialize. The phrase “structurally deficient” emerged as the leading qualifier: “In 1990, the federal government gave the I-35W bridge [this] rating...citing significant corrosion in its bearings” (Newsday, 2007). Again, in 2005, “a federal inspection also rated the bridge structurally deficient, giving it a 50 on a scale of 100 for structural stability” (Newsday, 2007). Minnesota Governor, Tim Pawlenty, promptly commanded local inspection of all bridges “with similar design” (Newsday, 2007). These actions were also

nationally elicited; “[The Minneapolis bridge] is one of 75,000 bridges in [the structurally deficient] category nationwide” (Newsday, 2007).

Before collapse, the bridge was currently in the repair process, although those adjustments were strictly “cosmetic...including resurfacing and guardrail and lighting replacement” (Kimball & Williamson). However, despite “reports issued by the Minnesota Department of Transportation over the past decade...detail[ing] problems with the bridge,” engineers clarified that future problems were not “foreseeable” and that “prematur[e] replac[ment]” was not necessary (Kimball & Williamson).

Although news coverage, televisually specific, has almost vanished since the moment of rupture, wires were overwhelmed with the developing story that Wednesday evening on August 1, 2007. Coverage aired both locally and nationally from a variety of stations with reporters on scene in Minneapolis either taping for newscasts or gathering information for newspapers. For example, the LexisNexis Academic database yields 1,000 articles in a general search of the collapse. Ranging from newswires and press releases to news transcripts, extending to newspapers and blogs, saturation is evident.

*Establishing the Narrative Aesthetically: August 1, 2007*

Presenting its entire allotted Evening News segment, beginning at 9:00CT and airing until 10:00, constant, uninterrupted broadcast is delivered from CNN. Anderson Cooper, from the studio, brings the audience “up to pace” with the

unfolding events as sections of the mangled steel trusses are pictured from overhead (CNN Evening News, August 1). Recap gives way to live witness callers, to a lacking press conference involving Minnesota officials, and again to more witness callers [see Figure 7] (CNN Evening News, August 1). Dave Ernewein, operations manager at local radio station, KTNF, emerges as a resolute force of information and opinion amongst the developing chaos.

With night beginning to fall, rescue missions are slowed—hope for the missing diminishes; the setting sun most likely signifies death for those still unaccounted for. Here, the plot develops for the first time. At 6:05CT, the I35-W bridge collapsed into the Mississippi River. News anchor, Randi Kaye, describes “mangled concrete and twisted metal” (CNN Evening News, August 1). Questions remain unanswered; the causes of the catastrophe are unknown, even structural engineer Ted Galambos attests to being “puzzled completely” (CNN Evening News, August 1). The plot shifts as initial complexity is met with disappointment. Although Anderson Cooper notes the heroic efforts of rescue teams, darkness “adds to the difficulty” (CNN Evening News, August 1). Within the span of three hours, the plot changes drastically: rescue is forced into recovery. An already emotional circumstance is heightened further by this development. Plot serves as a powerful agent in attracting and maintaining audience attention in the initial stages of broadcast. Viewers trustingly turn to CNN for developing information and ultimately, truth.

Following this advancement in plot, Cooper directly speaks with radio manager, Dave Ernewein, the first substantial character addressed by CNN.

Appendix 7<sup>12</sup>:

August 1, 2007

Begin Time: 09:00:10 pm; End Time: 09:59:50 pm; Duration: 59:40

(Studio: Anderson Cooper) Breaking news on the collapse of the 35W bridge in Minneapolis introduced; scenes shown.
(No location given: Randi Kaye) The breaking of the I-35W bridge reviewed; scenes shown of the mangled, broken bridge in the Mississippi River. [EYEWITNESSES, Joe COSTELLO&nbsp;- describe what happened.]
(Studio: Anderson Cooper) Live interviews held with KTNF operations manager Dave Erenwein† and radio talk show host Ian Punnett† about the bridge collapse; bridge scenes shown. [ERENEWEIN&nbsp;- describes what happened on a heavily travelled route.] [PUNNETT&nbsp;- describes the rescue effort and conditions at the site.]
(Studio: Anderson Cooper) Live coverage of the press conference by Mayor R.T. Rybak†, police Chief Tim Dolan, Governor Tim Pawlenty† and a Red Cross official; inset scenes from the accident site shown. [RYBAK&nbsp;- describes what happened with the incident now under control.] [DOLAN&nbsp;- talks about the school bus of children.] [PAWLENTY&nbsp;- outlines what is being done at the site.] [MAN&nbsp;- comments on the school children.]
(Studio: Anderson Cooper) The headlines in the bridge collapse incident and the reports from eyewitnesses updated; scenes shown of the school bus and other vehicles on the bridge area and of the people. [Red Cross-Twin Cities Courtney JOHNSON&nbsp;- talks about the "walking wounded" schoolkids.] [PUNNETT&nbsp;- talks about the "first responders."] [Witness Will FARLEY†- describes what happened on the bridge: that it is chaos.]
(Studio: Anderson Cooper) What is known about the dead and injured, submerged cars and train cars reviewed; scenes shown, including the injured. [Structural engineer retired professor Ted GALAMBOS†- says he is puzzled about this bridge failure.] [Emergency preparedness-Minneapolis Kristi ROLLWAGEN†- talks about the rescue-recovery operations, the vehicles submerged in the water, the rescue workers on scene.] [Witness Josh FISHER†- describes what happened after the bridge collapsed.]
(Studio: Anderson Cooper) The medical update presented in a press conference with Hennepin County medical center Dr. Joseph Clinton†; inset site scenes shown. [CLINTON&nbsp;- answers questions about the injured and the kind of injuries.]
(Studio: Anderson Cooper) Live interview held with radio host Punnett about the scene around the bridge area now. [PUNNETT&nbsp;- describes the scene, securing the area and the approaching weather; recounts the commonalities in the witness accounts.] Live video shown of the darkness in Minneapolis now.
(Studio: Anderson Cooper) A survivor's account of falling off the bridge in his truck presented. [MAN&nbsp;- says he fell 30 feet and is lucky to be alive.]
(Studio: Anderson Cooper) An eyewitness account presented. [FARLEY&nbsp;- describes what happened at the "completely silent" scene.]
(Studio: Anderson Cooper) Speculation about what caused the bridge to collapse continued. [Structural engineer GALAMBOS&nbsp;- says whatever happened happened fast in this terrible, terrible disaster.]

<sup>12</sup>Vanderbilt University, CNN Evening News for Wednesday, Aug 06, 2007

Only a resident of a surrounding Minneapolis area, Ernewein is neither an expert nor a possessor of qualified information. He offers only his opinion and we know him only by the sound of his fluid and confident voice. From this characterization, Ernewein establishes setting, described as “real reminiscent of New York after 9/11” (CNN Evening News, August 1). This initiates identification on a national level. “Sirens everywhere. People running everywhere,” Ernewein says (CNN Evening News, August 1). Cooper complements this image by stating “a terrorist could not have created a scene so hellish” (CNN Evening News, August 1). Whether intentionally or unintentionally construed, this analogy is emotion-evoking and creates a bond between the audience and Ernewein. Setting no longer has to be described; the connection is automatically and effortlessly understood. Arguably, no recent event contains the same power and meaning than that of September 11<sup>th</sup>. Characterization, though not fully developed, is largely aided in its relation with setting. The collapse, attributed to one of, if not the most, single, devastating, event in past decades, provides legitimacy for the character. An immediate association is fashioned with the audience as Ernewein becomes more than just a voice.

Setting, crucial in aesthetic characterization, also presents the logic behind relevance. On the surface, the destruction of one of Minnesota’s most highly traveled bridges is pertinent only to those who rely on this structure to transport them between Minneapolis, Saint Paul, and neighboring locations. However, CNN delivers newscast to a national audience; only a small sample of this population pertains directly to the crisis at hand. Despite the devastation,

coverage is not functionally significant to those in other areas of the country. At large, the message is essentially inappropriate. However, Ernewein transcends this disparity. September 11<sup>th</sup> was a national disaster; the tragedy in Minnesota should not differ. Unprovoked, American citizens suffered and died due to the wrath of terror. Unprovoked, Minnesotan citizens suffered and died due to the wrath of structural deficiency. Randi Kaye comments that “the bridge fell without warning” (CNN Evening News, August 1). Innocent victims were no more responsible for the situation than any other American who travels over any other bridge. Already sympathetic to 9/11 references, an excluded audience converts to an included one. If the tragedy demonstrates no distinct causes, the degree of which Minnesota’s bridge is separated from another is substantially reduced. Consequently, victims of the collapse are not different from the average viewer. Risk is presented and agitation spreads across the nation. If questions in Minnesota have yet to be clarified, should the strength of bridges in Virginia, California, or Missouri be trusted? As the issue intensifies, relevance is established. Both September 11<sup>th</sup> imagery and perplexity localize the progressing circumstances in Minnesota—the national audience becomes a relevant one, now suiting of the initially inappropriate message.

Relevance, ultimately driven by emotional factors, essentially ignores factual claims. Though what is unknown largely outweighs what is known, CNN must provide value to the segment. Again, Dave Ernewein confronts this issue for CNN. Anderson Cooper asks Ernewein to “explain where this bridge connects and its importance to the city” (CNN Evening News, August 1). Despite

the fact that Ernewein establishes himself credibly by identifying with the audience, he is in no position to propose reliable information. However, Ernewein responds intelligibly, speaking quickly without stutters or pauses as he names specific roads and directions, past bridge construction, and the vital role that the structure played in connecting the Twin Cities (CNN Evening News, August 1). Beyond this, CNN does not have other factual evidence, especially attesting to the foundation of the problem: the responsible factors for the collapse.

While Ernewein is delivering his statements, a quadruple image is televisually placed. The screen, divided in four, displays separate, moving videos. The images, zooming in and out, switch from ambulances to victims being escorted by emergency personnel to the collapsed bridge itself (CNN Evening News, August 1). Rather than providing a candid recount of the incident, these captured scenes overwhelm. In an attempt to balance the lack of facts, CNN relies on another emotional approach: the diatribe. Theodore Windt argues that “a major purpose of the diatribe is to shock...people seldom become concerned about problems until they are shocked” (8). Arguably, CNN realizes that fact is unsubstantial at this point in the disaster. As a result, the quadruple image serves as an alternative. If facts can not provoke a proper response, shock will. Flashes of destruction, not meant to expose detail, generate an overall feeling of catastrophe, of shock. This way, the audience does not dismiss the situation because it is unconcerned. In conjunction with Ernewein’s report, a visual diatribe is created. Images offset the lack of fact, and together, these two elements elicit audience attention.

In its first piece of Evening News broadcast, CNN presents plot, characterization, setting, factualness, and relevance effectually. Most of the concepts are intertwined, building off of one another and increasing the legitimacy of its coverage. When one aspect is lacking, another replaces it by diversion. Aesthetics yield more power than truth on August 1<sup>st</sup>, but the mere presence of the aesthetics aids truth in its struggle to present a convincing representation of reality.

*Characterization and Relevance as Narrative Agents: August 3, 2007*

Two days following the disaster in Minnesota, CNN continues to devote its Evening News segment to the story. In contrast to the first day's coverage, this broadcast is interrupted and is not solely focused on the bridge collapse. "A Hollywood Dog Attack" headlines at 9:33CT, slightly past halfway into the program (CNN Evening News, August 3). Anderson Cooper introduces, again in studio, as recovery efforts are shown to begin. Officials address the situation, survivors, rescuers, and relatives of the victims share their stories. Questions arise about the funding for the Minnesota Twins' new baseball stadium and state infrastructure is addressed [see Figure 8] (CNN Evening News, August 3). Aesthetic and truth factors have altered since the story first aired, directly influencing the overall effectiveness of CNN's narrative.

Although two days have passed since the original moment of rupture, plot has remained fairly consistent. Rapid change occurred in the early hours of

Figure 8:  
August 3, 2007

8A<sup>13</sup>

Begin Time: 09:01:00 pm; End Time: 09:15:30 pm; Duration: 14:30

(Studio: Anderson Cooper) The estimates on those unaccounted for from the collapse of the bridge in Minneapolis reviewed; scenes shown of recovery divers working in the Mississippi River, of visiting First Lady Laura Bush, the bridge wreckage. [Hennepin County Sheriff Rich STANEK†- comments on the working conditions.] [BUSH&nbsp;- comments.] [Governor Tim PAWLENTY†- admits there were problems with the bridge.]
(Studio: Anderson Cooper) Earlier interview held with survivor Dijana Andik. [ANDIK&nbsp;- describes what happened as she hurtled down and a cement block came through the windshield, going underwater, realizing she would not be found and then getting out.]
(Studio: Anderson Cooper) The image of fire department Capt. Shanna Hanson† searching for survivors shown.
(Minneapolis: Randi Kaye) First responder Hanson interview presented; inset video shown. [HANSON&nbsp;- describes the challenge of trying to get to the cars in the river, how she came to the bridge, finding no people in the cars in her "secondary search".]
(Studio: Anderson Cooper) Report introduced.
(Minneapolis: Gary Tuchman) The story of a bridge worker who plunged into the river in a skid loader and is missing presented. [Victim's mother Dorothy SVENDSEN†- talks about her son, Greg and what happened.] What happened to the other 17 workers on the bridge, who all got off safely and the story of survivor Marcelo Cruz, who will get a new handicapped van, discussed.
(Studio: Anderson Cooper) The raw data on steel deck truss bridges presented.

8B<sup>14</sup>

Begin Time: 09:19:00 pm; End Time: 09:21:50 pm; Duration: 02:50

(Studio: Anderson Cooper) House passage of a bill authorizing funds to rebuild the I-35W bridge noted. Keeping Them Honest segment introduced.
(Minneapolis: Ed Lavandera) How Minnesota is funding a new major league baseball stadium in Minneapolis while the money could be used on other projects examined. [Political activist Leslie DAVIS†, Minnesota state senate John MARTY†- question the state's priorities.] [Governor Tim PAWLENTY†- responds.]

8C<sup>15</sup>

Begin Time: 09:25:40 pm; End Time: 09:33:10 pm; Duration: 07:30

"Better Roads" magazine statistics on bridges in five states cited. Keeping Them Honest segment introduced.
(Everett, Pennsylvania: Jim Acosta) Congressional pork and bridges examined; scenes shown from central Pennsylvania of I-99, promoted by now-retired Representative Bud Shuster for his district. [Taxpayers for Common Sense Steve ELLIS†- says it is political muscle over need.] [Pennsylvania Governor Ed RENDELL&nbsp;- says the infrastructure is crumbling; admits Shuster benefits our state.] [SHUSTER&nbsp;- defends the highway.]
(Studio: Anderson Cooper) Live interview held with "The Edge of Disaster" author Stephen Flynn about the Minneapolis bridge accident. [FLYNN&nbsp;- says the infrastructure is old and not aging gracefully; comments on the cascading problems that leads to bridge accidents and on the deterrent value of fixing the infrastructure; states bridges get brittle with age and we are using outdated bridges more.]

<sup>13</sup> Vanderbilt University, CNN Evening News for Friday, Aug 03, 2007 (Section 1)

<sup>14</sup> Vanderbilt University, CNN Evening News for Friday, Aug 03, 2007 (Section 2)

<sup>15</sup> Vanderbilt University, CNN Evening News for Friday, Aug 03, 2007 (Section 3)

disaster; chaos is not as apparent because time has forced its complacency. CNN reports that “The Governor has ordered the re-inspection of every bridge in the state,” an expected demand (CNN Evening News, August 3). Anderson Cooper attests that “searching the river remains very risky, very difficult,” as recovery efforts continue (CNN Evening News, August 3). In Minnesota, the situation *remains*, indicating that little to no progress has been accomplished since the last time a story was delivered by CNN. The sense of urgency, ever-present on August 1<sup>st</sup>, has subsided. Without breaking developments to disrupt devastating monotony, concern diminishes. Repetition of the same plot, illustrated by the same mess of contorted green metal, refuses to be as shocking and as touching as it had been in days prior (CNN Evening News, August 3). The stagnation of plot development slows the overall interest that the audience has for story. Few new pictures fail to re- evoke emotion that had already been expressed; an arguably numb audience signals a decrease in the narrative’s effectiveness.

Despite inactivity in plot, characterization advances as emotional interviews are taped with those affected most in the collapse. Videos, as opposed to day one’s coverage of phone calls, introduce a stronger dynamic. Words are not capable of communicating what visible grief and fear are. Evening News on August 2<sup>nd</sup>, one day prior, delivers a story on Marcelo Cruz, a Mexican immigrant unluckily crossing the bridge at the time of the disaster, in a personal interview from his home (CNN Evening News, August 2). On August 3<sup>rd</sup>, CNN reports again on Cruz, with Cooper directly commenting “I hear there has been a development”—the only time in the thirty-three minutes of the broadcast (CNN

Evening News, August 3). Marcelo's character is re-introduced. He happens to be a "paraplegic driver who survived by slamming his car into a wall" (CNN Evening News, August 3). Marcelo, clearly characterized as the innocent victim the night before, received a call from a California-based charity after his previous story aired (CNN Evening News, August 3). Through his thick accent, Marcelo chronicles his struggle: stopping the car with a "special handbrake," he could not exit the car because his ramp would have pointed him off the steep slope of the bridge (CNN Evening News, August 2). Anchor Gary Tuchman asks if he would have ended up the river; Marcelo responds, "yes, in my wheelchair" (CNN Evening News, August 2). Instead of aiding the screaming woman in the car behind him, Marcelo had to wait for rescue (CNN Evening News, August 2). Strong character is built; Marcelo emerges as the helpless Samaritan with good intentions yet hindered by his handicap. CNN develops the story further by noting that the California charity gave Marcelo "another handicapped accessible van to use as long as he needs" (CNN Evening News, August 3). In addition, it will "fly him and his mother...on a trip to California so they can meet celebrities and go to Disneyland all on the charity's dime" (CNN Evening News, August 3). Divergent from the real issue, CNN devotes time to re-touch on this story. Celebrities and Disneyland are insignificant when compared to the lives missing and the lives lost. However, this sensationalized development changes the pace of the broadcast. Marcelo's motives and actions were positively rewarded. Through characterization, the audience is able to emotionally identify with Marcelo, proving effective for CNN's narrative.

Like characterization, setting is also altered in this broadcast. This time, association shifts to hopelessness. Anderson Coopers states “crews have come up describing cars piled on cars underwater when they can see anything at all” (CNN Evening News, August 3). Video is shown of divers plunging into the Mississippi which Cooper notes is “murky and dangerous” (CNN Evening News, August 3). In this sense, rescue has slowed, personnel are “up against a wall of water and concrete below and a wave of heartbreak above” (CNN Evening News, August 3). This unpromising setting reflects the mood and tone the narrative is taking. Hopelessness only breeds more hopelessness; without changes in plot, the setting becomes uninviting for viewers. It is unlikely that optimism can grow out of these dark waters. Rescuers are “working by feel alone...one called it Braille diving” (CNN Evening News, August 3). In the bridge disaster, plot and setting are undeniably linked. When the plot advances, the mood of setting alters. However, because changes in plot have not been made for two days, setting is increasingly desolate. In order to maintain the audience’s concern for the truth, setting must display hope in the future.

Although it is not entirely progressive, factualness has increased, providing value to CNN’s narrative. Cooper opens by commenting that “the fifth person [was] identified dead” (CNN Evening News, August 3). Numbers, which had been unconfirmed in the first day, are now substantiated. Thus, this provides credibility in CNN’s report. The dead may be established but the missing remain questionable: “Many of those missing have been found alive but officials stress numbers are likely to change” (CNN Evening News, August 3). Media functions

as the messenger of this tragic information. Despite the fact that expert determinations such as death tolls are not a result of their work, viewers unjustly transpose this standard on to it. In this case, because the “unaccounted for range from 8 to 30,” the audience treats this discrepancy as a fault of CNN. Further, Cooper states that “it will be a while before the full extent of this human tragedy becomes clear” (CNN Evening News, August 3). Viewers, now approaching the fourth day of these unfolding events, yearn for answers, not more waiting. Periodically, especially within transitions, the question “Sudden Collapse/What Went Wrong?” flashes on the screen (CNN Evening News, August 3). Although Minnesota Governor, Tim Pawlenty, admits that “there were warning signs that there were problems with the bridges,” this repeated question remains unanswered. It is often followed by victim testimonials who are also expressing the same concern. Cooper addresses this issue, commenting that the prominent question remains “Why? Why did the 40-year-old, heavily traveled bridge suddenly crumble? And why didn’t anyone heed warnings?” (CNN Evening News, August 3). Frustration directs toward CNN. If it can not provide the answers to such questions, why does it continue to pose them? Again, due to an absence of explicit fact, CNN can only imply that it understands the pertinent issues. By repeatedly questioning a fact it cannot answer, it attempts to maintain audience concern, hoping that the audience will continue tuning in until the truth is actually revealed. Until then, fact exists in vague form, perpetuating the narrative to an irritated yet still interested audience.

Without answers and without any breaking developments, it is essential that relevance is addressed. Viewers, despite their emotional connection to the story, will not wait for truth if relevance is lost in the process. Capitalizing on this issue, the segment is opened with direct responses of relevance. Not forgetting the power of the 9/11 factor, Cooper states that “there are thousands of problem bridges needing billions of dollars in work; why some say spending that money on bridges may support the so-called war on terror” (CNN Evening News, August 3). This incongruous juxtaposition sparks interest. Not only is terrorism a national form of identification, but bridges are also. This issue, although it may include Minnesota’s bridge, applies to *thousands* of bridges, encompassing citizens nationwide. Following this unanticipated supposition, Cooper will also “investigate the outrage over a stadium some say sucked vital money away from fixing bridges including the one that collapsed” (CNN Evening News, August 3). Again, this issue transcends the singularity of Minneapolis’s circumstance, applying it to multiple bridges in other areas. CNN presents these issues at the beginning of its segment but does not address them until the very end. This way, viewers absorb the entire broadcast, and finish feeling as though the unchanging situation in Minnesota still directly involves them. Relevance, significant when the narrative approaches consistency, proves to still exist; however, the truth in these claims is to be judged by the audience.

This second broadcast underscores different tactics of aesthetic and truth. Characterization and relevance are crucial as plot and setting prove uneventful. Factualness continues to stand on its own due to the unavailability of evidence

despite the high levels of demand for it. As a result, characterization and relevance are over-emphasized, perhaps unnaturally at times, in order to secure a narrative damaged by weak elements.

*Argumentative Fact in a Diminishing Narrative: August 6, 2007*

Although CNN continues to report on the wreckage in Minnesota five days after the collapse, only three minutes and twenty seconds are designated for coverage. Questions of “Sudden Collapse/What Went Wrong?” still flash across the screen, even employing an almost permanent spot in the bottom right-hand corner (CNN Evening News, August 6). This phrase switches between another, “Unanswered/Questions,” signifying that main concerns will proceed in their unsatisfied state. Anchor John Roberts hosts this segment, from the studio, quickly moving into Ed Lavandera’s reports from Minneapolis. Already aired footage of the bridge is shown again and a variety of officials lend their knowledge and opinions on the events that may have triggered this tragedy [see Figure 9] (CNN Evening News, August 6). Aesthetic and truth elements shift in emphasis from the August 3<sup>rd</sup> coverage. Factualness drives this report as characterization and relevance, two significant features from August 3<sup>rd</sup>, remain unstressed.

Subtle advances in plot are demonstrated; CNN expresses that “helicopters spent the day making slow passes over [the scene]” (CNN Evening News, August 6). Videos of recovery efforts no longer exist as a mission which started out as

Figure 9<sup>16</sup>:

August 6, 2007

Begin Time: 09:18:40 pm; End Time: 09:22:00 pm; Duration: 03:20

(Studio: John Roberts) The situation at the collapsed bridge in Minneapolis introduced; scenes shown from memorials services.
(Minneapolis: Ed Lavandera) The investigation of the I-35W bridge featured; scenes shown from the river, including pieces of the bridge and vehicles on the bridge and in the water. [NTSB Mark ROSENKER†, civil engineer Dick STEHLY†, Hennepin County Sheriff Rich STANEK††-comment on the bridge.] The operation of resurfacing the bridge and the distribution of weight on the bridge with four lanes closed discussed.

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<sup>16</sup> Vanderbilt University, CNN Evening News for Monday, Aug 06, 2007

rescue, turned to recovery, and now stands at figuring out the point of collapse. In this sense, the value of human life is de-personalized. Coverage surpasses the continuing search for the missing, directing its attention to answering questions it had previously left unfulfilled. “Precise detail” is noted and Roberts informs that “the debris field is often useful in figuring out what fell first, where, and why” (CNN Evening News, August 6). Technicality overpowers preceding emotional content. The investigation is likened to “an autopsy,” insinuating that although reasons are still unknown, they are in the process of being uncovered (CNN Evening News, August 6). Plot development appears to be progressing, despite its painstakingly slow pace; investigations need to be meticulous in order to yield conclusiveness and truth.

The story line still proves to exist but CNN decides to drop all characters from the narrative. Marcelo Cruz and other survivors that had been significant sources of emotional appeal and identification, inadvertently forcing audience sympathy, disappear. To an extent, the effectiveness of the story is only as effective as its characters. In sacrificing its characters, CNN dismisses the main part of its narrative. Again, de-personalization occurs; the tragedy which once had a face and a story of its own, is reduced to displaced concrete blocks and collapsed metal. At the least, CNN briefly depicts an emotional embrace between two women, obviously distraught, as Roberts comments: “families of the missing can only sit and wait” (CNN Evening News, August 3). This video, no more than five seconds in length, is a repeated image, airing for the first time in the August 1<sup>st</sup> segment. Debatably, even if CNN were to continue to portray those deeply

affected by this catastrophe, it would have no more influence than its absence. Relating back to Windt's diatribe, in which its main purpose rests in instating shock, "[its] major weakness...is that it is limited in effectiveness" (8). Astonishment may successfully provoke attention but it does not possess the power of maintaining it: "once attention has been gained...the diatribe diminishes in usefulness" (Windt 8). Aesthetic characterization, significant in previous coverage, fails to generate continuing concern for the narrative's truth.

Comparable to characterization and plot, setting is also responsible for severing connections once essential for attaching the audience to the narrative. A single church scene is momentarily aired; clergy advance to the altar, a respect paid to a life lost. Roberts touches upon "the memorial services over the weekend," but the church scene is voiced over, providing a transition into "the long investigation ahead" (CNN Evening News, August 6). Here, mood transitions from terror and hopelessness in previous coverage to essential indifference. The dead are not nationally commemorated, a fact seemingly contradictory when contrasted to the overwhelming emotion previously expressed. Though families still mourn, the country does not. Setting, reflective of the emotional content of the narrative, proves that an audience once interested in obtaining truth, no longer possess the same concern.

With aesthetic elements largely responsible for a diminishing narrative, factualness emerges stronger than it has in the prior two discussed airings. The majority of the August 6<sup>th</sup> program centers around credible opinion and official reports. Chairman of the National Transportation Security Board, Mark Rosenker,

declares “we have taken a look at a lot, a lot of debris” (CNN Evening News, August 6). Instead of panning to repeated pictures of the wreckage from the scene, the camera remains steady on Rosenker as he delivers his statement. “Portions of the bridge...[are] being reassembled downriver, a technique used in plane crash investigations” (CNN Evening News, August 6). Expert performance is underway as “the NTSB...is keeping everything in the realm of possibility” (CNN Evening News, August 6). Although concrete evidence will not be developed “overnight,” procedures have begun, allowing for the disclosure of breakthroughs as they become increasingly available (CNN Evening News, August 6). Rosenker’s report transitions to civil engineer Dick Stehly’s. Due to the construction on the bridge at the time of collapse, lanes were closed. Stehly attests that “unbalanced weight on a bridge that was already showing signs of cracking and wearing down could help explain the collapse” (CNN Evening News, August 6). Again, the camera focuses on Stehly as he legitimizes his answers. Quadruple imagery is not imposed to overcome fact in this segment because fact is substantial enough to support itself. Following these accounts, others are addressed, expressed in much the same way as Rosenker and Stehly’s. Though it has taken five days to develop, fact strongly materializes; however, in the absence of aesthetic qualities, the audience may not view this development significantly enough in order for truth to finally surface.

Argument had been previously sustained solely by relevance’s method of localizing the catastrophe. With factualness’s appearance, an influential persuasive stance could be made by the combination of fact and relevance,

especially since the withdrawal of aesthetic shock. However, relevance, once strong in nature, is completely disregarded. For the last time, the situation is depersonalized as the incident exerts its force further from home than it had in days prior. It is important to note that Minnesota bridge coverage is not the starting material of CNN's Evening News on August 6<sup>th</sup>. Instead, broadcast is opened with the "Breaking News" inscription on the bottom of the screen: "6 coal miners missing after Utah mine collapse" (CNN Evening News, August 6). Despite factual progress in Minnesota, a new crisis surfaces in Utah—rich in all aesthetic qualities and relevant on a national level. Consequently, relevance is abandoned as focus shifts from an "outdated" issue to a current one. Although the truth of the bridge collapse is near exposure, it is interrupted by another narrative, similar in appeal to that of Minnesota's just five days previous.

This third representation of reality as perceived by CNN, most abundant in fact, lacks all other qualities. Aesthetically, plot, characterization, and setting proved initially powerful; eventually, time renders them worthless. Factualness supports the totality of the program, an element previously sought after most by viewers. However, as a result of aesthetic absence, fact is unable to gain and maintain attention alone. With the emergence of a new catastrophe, relevance in Minnesota collapses as attention directs itself to new aesthetics.

**CHAPTER SEVEN**  
**Future Track:**  
**Conclusion and Implications**

Whether CNN's lead story involves a commercial jetliner explosion, an inferno at a popular nightclub, or the collapse of a major highway bridge, narrative construction is apparent within each of the surveyed segments. Fact, relevance, characterization, plot, and setting seamlessly integrate into the coverage; CNN often strengthens certain qualities when others provide unsubstantial narrative support. Generally, the aesthetic factors (characterization, plot, and setting) influence simultaneously, immaterial of the existence of any argumentative elements (fact and relevance). These aesthetic elements are presented concurrently, supporting each other in order to substantially develop narrative technique. Alone, characterization suffers without the company of either plot or setting. For this reason, characterization is placed within the broader context of the setting, a combination which is ultimately verified by the narrative's plot. Although, for example, plot itself conveys narrative characteristics, overall influence is best demonstrated by the interplay of all aesthetic qualities in unison. Each delivers a variation on a similar aesthetic theme: plot communicates the essential storyline, setting creates the context, and characterization provides personality. Together, these elements generate a compelling aesthetic narrative—one capable of commanding attention and imparting truth.

In comparison, fact and relevance are also frequently presented together in an attempt to validate logical claims. Whereas aesthetic qualities exercised greater influence by utilizing the strengths of related elements in conjunction with their own, argumentative tactics employ a parallel approach. Fact alone elicits minimal audience interest. A viewer's uninvolved and unaffected status is only reinforced by simple statistics and notice of ongoing investigations. However, once these emerging facts are deemed as relevant to the viewers, their condition transforms from uninvolved to involved, from unaffected to affected. Consequently, the audience then experiences the narrative on both a less superficial and hypothetical level—it claims the story as its own, personally classifying the narrative as significant and thus affirming its influence.

Although strictly categorized, CNN establishes an argumentative/aesthetic push and pull—when one class deteriorates, the other develops. Together, fact and relevance, while supporting each other within an argumentative realm, equally buttress unsuccessful aesthetics. By replacing a weak combination of plot, setting, and characterization, the narrative endures. Likewise, when fact falters and relevance wanes, aesthetics control the narrative. Ultimately, aesthetic presence can capably outweigh argument's absence; equally, argument is able to reinstate the narrative when aesthetics diminish. This reliance unites the factors, merging aesthetics and argument into a power capable of directing coverage and affecting a captive audience.

As demonstrated by CNN's Evening "World View" coverage of TWA Flight 800's mid-air explosion, apparent aesthetics eventually surrender to

argument. Unique in nature, this disaster provides negligible physical evidence of tragedy. CNN is unable to broadcast wreckage and debris, visual context central to aesthetic influence. However, setting ironically emerges as an essential element in early coverage of the explosion despite the nonexistence of a compelling, physical disaster site. Instead, rapid changes in anchor location overwhelm the audience and an aesthetic narrative surfaces. Consequently, setting is unable to substantiate the narrative in its entirety and fact and relevance emerge in subsequent coverage. Argument strengthens Flight 800's narrative once aesthetic qualities waver. By the narrative's conclusion, relevance remains the most influential factor. Discussion of terrorism proves unrelenting—pilot error or mechanical defect, although conveyed as probable explanations by authorities, refuse to be accepted by the narrative. Instead, relevance underscores terrorism. In a tragedy absent of even a single survivor, the cause must be the result of an uncontrollable, terrific force: terrorism. However, as the nation would find out four years later, “an explosion of flammable vapors in the center wing fuel tank” remains ultimately responsible—“not a bomb, not a missile strike” (Fiorino). Although inaccurately portrayed by the narrative, relevance successfully maintains viewer curiosity. However, ungrounded, these overstatements eventually succumb to the power of a more promising narrative—a bombing at Atlanta's Olympic Games, a story which captures CNN's Evening “World View” lead story position and redirects audience attention away from Flight 800 and onto a fresh narrative (CNN Evening News, July 28).

In relation to CNN's construction of TWA's coverage, The Station's blaze is framed in a similar fashion. Initial fact is strongly reinforced by aesthetic elements in the coverage's preliminary segment. Characterization and setting, through primary eyewitness video, visually deliver truth to CNN's viewers. This testimony, precisely the evidence which is glaringly absent from TWA's narration, conveys the disaster's reality. Progressing, however, argument substitutes for aesthetics, and factual inconsistency ultimately surrenders the narrative to heightened tensions between the United States and Iraq. Although the circumstances of The Station's fire are vastly divergent from those of Flight 800, a comparable balance between argument and aesthetics is apparent. Both stories exhibit powerful aesthetics which are eventually overpowered by faulty argument. Unable to captivate viewers by means of unfounded logic, the narrative effectively changes focus, highlighting another developing topic to replace the exhausted factors.

Analogous to both Flight 800's and The Station's tragedies, the Minneapolis bridge collapse also displays an initially aesthetic-powered narrative, ultimately surrendering to fact. Here, due to the bridge's physical enormity, visual factors prove influential as CNN stresses aesthetic narrative qualities. Further, characterization fully develops—individuals are honored for their heroism. In contrast to the other surveyed segments, TWA bore no survivors; the haste and chaos of The Station's fire afforded minimal opportunity for valor, ultimately, by its nature, reducing the strength of characterization's narrative contributions. Although aesthetics present themselves differently in every

situation, the effect renders utmost importance. Characterization, setting, and plot lead the narrative, eventually submitting to argument. Fact, however, as demonstrated in CNN's other narratives, unsuccessfully maintains audience attention. As a result, once again, emergent concerns conquer an overextended presentation. CNN commands attention toward trapped miners in Utah, abandoning Minnesota's narrative in exchange for a renewed attempt at aesthetic and argumentative construction.

Although viewing each segment of every story individually exposes detail within the aspects of plot, characterization, setting, relevance, and fact, it is the holistic evolution of the coverage that generates the true narrative. Strong aesthetic quality succumbs to the influence of argument, ultimately surrendering predominantly to fact. From here, the pattern is cyclically restored, its gyration powered by the emergence of a breaking story superior in both urgency and uncertainty to the one previous. In essence, any given segment is stimulated by its predecessor and invigorates its successor. This continuous progression overwhelms, congesting newswires and viewers alike with each new development as it abandons less pressing issues. However, the importance of segments is not innate within the circumstance; rather, it is constructed by the source, deemed significant by external standards. Unrelenting, coverage from one situation is consciously and forcibly switched to another. This transfer immediately subjects viewers to intense aesthetics, overpowering any dissatisfaction lingering from a prior story. Consequently, viewers are uncontrollably engulfed in whichever coverage emerges next, unable to return to previous segments.

An alarming concern surfaces in the incapability of a viewer to receive continuing information after stories have exchanged focus and value. Retracting one issue and replacing it with another at its own discretion, the news center proves its authority over its viewers, unrestricted by audience opinion or judged by the coherence and truth of its segments. At large, CNN's coverage of all three examined tragedies can be analyzed according to Fisher's narrative rationality, but the outcome does not cease its cycle of breaking news. Composed of narrative probability, the overall coherence of the story, and narrative fidelity, the validity of the expressed logic, narrative rationality demonstrates the accurateness of the portrayed reality (Fisher, 1987, 133). Although coverage is initially expressed emotionally, it concludes apathetically, without references or depictions to the lives both lost and ruined—not a true testament of coherence. Interestingly, when narrative fidelity either fails to clarify inconsistency (as demonstrated by TWA and The Station) or finally originates through official reports upon the narrative's culmination (Minnesota), CNN discards the story due to the arrival of a constructed, more pertinent issue. Therefore, if largely lacking in both narrative probability and fidelity, CNN's story does not possess narrative rationality. How then can a segment proven to be unpersuasive capture an audience and seamlessly direct it without contestation to the next developing story? The answer still lies within Fisher's narrative, only this time, it is on a larger scale.

Viewing the cyclical aspect of news converge from a critical perspective yields the persuasion that the individual story fails to produce. As a whole, plot, characterization, setting, relevance, and fact are derived from each segment, as

displayed in the context of this essay. However, narrative probability and narrative fidelity are not analyzed in terms of the particular; instead, they relate to the general—the cycle that CNN perpetuates. In this sense, narrative probability is expressed; a story formulates aesthetically, emphasizes argument, and consequently surrenders as a result of fact. Just as logic materializes, coverage is interrupted by an unfolding issue unrelated to the prior one. Despite audience concern for truth of the tragedies, focus shifts to Atlanta, Iraq, and Utah, where newer issues are advancing. Although, for example, Minnesota residents still lay lifeless at the bottom of the Mississippi River, CNN regards those in Utah as more pertinent and essential. As a result and without choice, viewers follow, assisted by the coherence of the cycle's force. Narrative fidelity, although absent regarding the specific, is present overall. Truth establishes itself not through facts of the events but through the coherence expressed within narrative probability. Because of this pattern of consistency, viewers can judge any stories incorporated in the same or similar fashion to the framework displayed by these crises as truthful conceptualizations. Any deviance from this construction would be viewed with less narrative fidelity, therefore communicating less truth. In contrast to examining coverage on an individual scale, a broader measure proves to contain narrative rationality, thus exemplifying its persuasive role in shaping audience reaction, opinion, and attention.

Ethically speaking, however, this justification is manipulative, deceiving viewers of a representative reality by placing focus on a constructed one. Discontent is silenced as the news centers consciously switch from one story to

another. Without warning, a segment receiving continuous press in days previous can be abandoned by the emergence of a newer crisis. As a result, attention for the original issue subsides; in this case, the victims and families of Flight 800, The Station, and Minnesota were nationally discarded in concern and prayer when unrelated developments overpowered their place on CNN's Evening News. In the short-term, communities are neglected by their country. What advances has TWA made in securing passengers aboard its commercial flights? How is West Warwick regaining its once positive small-town mentality? Where is Marcelo Cruz and did he meet his favorite celebrities on his sponsored trip to Hollywood? Unfortunately, these questions require more research than simply flipping to CNN Evening News and hopefully catching a review of the events. This would rarely happen; the cycle incessantly perpetuates, stopping for no one, slowing for nothing. In the long-term, this forces our nation to forget tragedies, erase heartache, and blindly move forward. Once emotionally charged, situations lose their impact, inevitably and merely becoming another transcript in the lost vaults of disasters.

An avenue for future study to more conclusively understand the disappearance of the coverage of these tragedies presents itself in the examination of the recurrence of abandoned narratives. Any resurfacing coverage from prior stories lends itself to broader conclusions regarding the narrative's strength of delivery. By analyzing the surviving elements, narrative characteristics can be observed both qualitatively and quantitatively, potentially providing explanations as to the significance of each factor in itself, absent of complete narrative

construction. Also, cross-network studies can be conducted in order to determine the extent to which coverage assumes narrative characteristics. Portrayals of disaster news coverage command continuing research—each new endeavor and varying perspective contributes to the truth expounded by the media and more importantly, society's comprehension of it.

From its inception, television news has proven both its pervasiveness and its influence. Previous studies have demonstrated coverage's conscious construction, the result of societal and commercial impacts. This structuring depends upon classified factors; in this case, Walter Fisher's narrative elements. By dually enforcing news coverage's validity, aesthetic and argumentative characteristics convey a truth to its audience. It is this influence, this control, which allows CNN to successfully direct viewer attention. Although narrative characteristics inevitably weaken, depriving the audience of the individual truths of each conceptualized segment, the unremitting structuring of prior and subsequent narratives effectively delivers ultimate value—truth—to broadcast viewers. Coverage of Flight 800's explosion, The Station's inferno, and Minnesota's bridge collapse, exhibits similar argumentative and aesthetic patterns. These sequences elicit authority, continually emphasizing the power of narrative construction and its command over audience perception.

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