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Shortly after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center towers, Rudy Giuliani, then the mayor of New York City, was asked how many people were confirmed dead at that point. He memorably replied, “More than we can be bear.” Today, not only is Giuliani remembered for his strong and steady presence during that perilous time, but much of his 2008 presidential campaign is based on the idea that the leadership he showed in the face of terrorism qualifies him to lead the United States.

But a countervailing narrative of Giuliani’s actions in relationship to September 11 is also available, though perhaps less widely publicized. Far from having the clear vision and strong hand the United States needs in the fight against terrorism, Giuliani has been accused of being complicit in several decisions that led to additional, unnecessary deaths. Under his watch as mayor, according to this account, the city’s emergency headquarters offices were relocated to the World Trade Center in the late 1990s—a controversial move at the time since the buildings had been the targets of an earlier terrorist attack. The shift meant that the city’s emergency headquarters was inoperable when it was needed most. Compounding the problems, despite years of proposals to unify their communication systems, New York City police and firefighters used different radio frequencies to communicate among themselves. Consequently, the city’s first responders could not talk to each other and coordinate their actions, leading to yet more avoidable deaths.

So ten years from now, will Giuliani be seen as one of the heroes of 9/11 or as one of the people blamed for the city’s lack of preparation? How will he be viewed twenty years from now? Fifty years from now?

In her well-researched and thought-provoking study *Troubled Pasts: News and the Collective Memory of Social Unrest*, Jill Edy, an assistant professor of communication at the University of Oklahoma, explores the role the media play as contested events are incorporated into what sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann have called the social stock of knowledge and what Maurice Halbwachs has called collective memory. Collective memory is the aspects of past events that are widely shared by specific social groups. They are the memories that transcend individual memory and experience—what we all know and agree upon about past events.

Collective memory is an extremely powerful notion. Indeed, in many ways, national and ethnic identities are defined by each group’s collective memories. For example, during the Balkan Wars in the 1990s, Americans learned about battles that took place in the 1300s and 1400s that were not even obscure footnotes in the world...
Edy builds two case studies from events during the 1960s to trace how complex news events are reported as they are unfolding and then re-presented in the media over the passage of time. Her objective is to determine how “disparate narratives of controversial events are winnowed and integrated to create a collective memory” (p. 150). The two “troubled moments” she has selected to study are the Watts race riots in Los Angeles in 1965 and the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. The convention was engulfed by violence and gave the world the memorable—of, at least, memorable at one time—phrase, “the whole world is watching,” which is how young, long-haired protestors taunted the Chicago police, who were using perhaps overly aggressive tactics to try to clear the streets.

In her close examination of the coverage of those two events, Edy makes several interesting observations. As could be expected from reporting from many different reporters over periods of time about events that were far from routine, different story lines emerge in different articles. Not infrequently, the same “facts” are framed differently and therefore seem to have different significance depending on the context of the story itself. For the Watts riots, Edy has identified four major narrative frameworks in the coverage. The riots reflected the residents’ lawlessness; the violence was a result of police brutality; the riots were caused by economic deprivation; or the riots represented an insurrection by inner-city African Americans against the white establishment. These different narrative frames often competed with each other within individual news stories, Edy observed, leading to what she calls an “indeterminacy” about the meaning of the event (p. 41).

According to Edy, the coverage of 1968 Democratic National Convention cleaved into two main story lines—what was happening inside the convention hall and the chaos outside the hall. The two story lines were not intertwined within individual articles but instead often were printed side by side in specific publications.

In describing the intricate contours of the news reports for each event, Edy does a careful job in identifying to whom reporters turned for information and what they reported on their own authority. She then applies the same careful analysis to the ways in which the Watts riots and the 1968 Democratic National Convention appear in articles. Once again, it is not surprising to learn that those “troubled pasts” appear most frequently when there is an obvious current news angle. For Watts, the Los Angeles riots of 1992 provided a news hook. For the Democratic National Convention, the Democrats’ return to Chicago in 1996 elicited reflection on the 1968 events.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this part of the analysis is who emerges as authoritative sources about the past. Governmental officials with a stake in defending their actions during the events themselves have often passed from the scene. Instead, the voices of “civilian” participants are more frequently heard. At the same time, the meaning of events is narrowed, with some of the narrative frames from the initial reporting on the events not reappearing in the later recollections.

As interesting as it is, Troubled Pasts has several shortcomings. First, the data is newspaper-centric, which is a significant limitation. Surely magazine articles, television shows and even, dare I say it, books, especially textbooks, play a large public role in building collective memory. Secondly, Edy seems to expect that a single, accepted collective memory should emerge at some point. But that doesn’t happen. Throughout her study, competitive narratives remain lively, even as some are discarded. Third, as Edy acknowledges, the use of past events within later press reports is driven more by the storytelling needs dictated by specific articles themselves than by social actors trying to impose their view of the meaning of the past. Fourth, the development of collective memory is a complex process of which media representations are but one, perhaps small part. On a more parochial level, perhaps the Watts riots and the 1968 Democratic National Convention will not be broadly remembered at all and will not become part of the collective memory. So these case studies may not be the most salient.

Despite these qualifications, Edy has written a smart book that is of interest to anybody who understands the development of the social stock of knowledge and collective memory as a powerful social process. And how will Rudy Giuliani’s role in the aftermath of September 11 be remembered? That will depend on part on the outcome of the election. He could be remembered as a hero or a person to blame. Or he may not be remembered at all.