

Denton, Robert E. Jr. (Ed). (2004). *Language, symbols and the media: Communication in the aftermath of the World Trade Center attack*. Somerset, NJ: Transaction.

Reviewed by: [Mark Antony Smith](#)

This book is a collection of essays examining the impact on communication of the World Trade Center attack.

The essays analyse September 11 2001 (9/11) in the context of the following: The recommitment to religious pluralism and the backlash to Islam; the importance of robust debate for democracy; the Patriot Act and other historical laws created in times of American crisis; the death and rebirth of irony as a way to deal with the crisis; the role of rituals of public spectacle and sport in creating a sense of healing, togetherness and patriotism; how the focus of the news media during the crisis saved the reputation of one high profile US politician and ruined that of another; young adults responses to the one year commemorations of the attacks; advertising responses; the re-packaging of the tourism industry; and the self imposed censorship of electronic media.

The essays read mainly as introductions to new or ongoing research by their authors and are therefore sometimes unsatisfying, giving only brief tours of the ideas discussed. I would recommend this book as a starting point only to those ideas.

The essays also spend a lot of time revolving around the idea of patriotism, yet few of them address patriotism as form of communication. Patriotism is largely undefined and unproblematised. As an observer of American politics and media from afar I dont connect readily with the full nature of the concept of patriotism as it is practiced or understood in the United States. It is my assumption therefore, from the lack of explication of this concept, that most of these essays have been written with an American audience in mind. The concept that the attacks communicated way further than the USA, especially to Afghanistan and Iraq or even New Zealand seems lost to many of the authors.

The main point many of the essays make is that patriotism has become a more important part of American life and the symbols of this patriotism have drawn people together in a time of upheaval.

Personally I was put somewhat off balance by what I perceived as hollowed deference to patriotism, and an unexpected sense that some authors were constrained in their criticism by a kind of unconscious self-censorship. Many essays start with authors expressing sorrow for those who have lost their lives and declaring that they stand behind the bravery of US soldiers serving in the War on Terrorism. This gives these essays a tendency to feel as though they are scared to step out and criticize some givens in recent American communication. The essays that I found strongest were those without apologies or caveats, which instead got straight into the meat of the communication that they were analysing.

The main thing missing, other than a conscious analysis of patriotism, is an investigation of the concept of how you can have a war on a noun? Personally I would also have welcomed some analysis of the constantly changing language of the Bush administration. (Does anyone remember Weapons of Mass Destruction?)

To summarize: I feel that this collection of essays has missed an opportunity. None of them analyzes the meanings of particular symbols, for instance the American flag. No essay questions the meanings of patriotism and none questions if there are alternate ways of seeing patriotism or being patriotic. Instead, turning to the flag, joining in with the notion of patriotism, is taken as a given for American people in time of stress. For instance the law enacted to protect the USA from further attacks was called the Patriot Act not the Protect America Act or similar.

I hope this book compels other researchers to really question how language, symbols and media have that been used since 9/11 as, for me, the book has only created more questions than it has answered.

Purchase information: This book is available from all good booksellers, or can be purchased direct from Footprint Books at www.footprint.com.au.

About the reviewer:

Mark Antony Smith is a postgraduate student studying Fine Arts at Massey University. His current area of research is looking at how imagery from news media is reinterpreted by artists and how that re-imaging changes the ideas communicated. He also works part-time in Massey Universitys Department of Communication and Journalism, Wellington, New Zealand, as a Multi-Media Technician. Mark also runs his own animation company, and has produced music videos and animations for television.

