



## New School University

Crisis Communication Study  
Media Studies Program  
The New School, New York

Dear Participant,

We would like for you to join us in learning what we can about communication patterns during and after the tragic events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. Similar studies have been conducted following other crisis situations, and the results have been very helpful in understanding how people behave during these times and how we can help them to communicate better. Your reply to this survey will be confidential, and if you provide your email address on this form, we will send you a copy of the results.

Many thanks for your participation,

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Associate Dean & Chair  
The New School  
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1. Where were you when you first learned of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks?

Home \_\_\_\_\_ On way to work \_\_\_\_\_ At work \_\_\_\_\_ At School \_\_\_\_\_

Other (specify): \_\_\_\_\_ What time was it? \_\_\_\_\_

2. What was your precise location when you first heard? \_\_\_\_\_

3. How did you first learn of the attacks? Eyewitness observation \_\_\_\_\_

Another person \_\_\_\_\_ Radio \_\_\_\_\_ Television \_\_\_\_\_ Other(specify) \_\_\_\_\_

4. Briefly describe your immediate experience of the attack, including what you did:

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5. What specific piece of information made you realize the seriousness of the attack?

\_\_\_\_\_ What time was it? \_\_\_\_\_

6. How did you hear this piece of information?

\_\_\_\_\_ Eyewitness Observation \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Another person

\_\_\_\_\_ Telephone

\_\_\_\_\_ Television (station \_\_\_\_\_)

\_\_\_\_\_ Radio (station \_\_\_\_\_)

7. Which information source did you use most in the 12 hours following the attack?

\_\_\_\_\_ Other people \_\_\_\_\_ Television (station \_\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_ Radio (station \_\_\_\_\_)

\_\_\_\_\_ Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_ What source did you use least? \_\_\_\_\_

8. What information source did you use in the 3 days following the attack?

\_\_\_\_\_ Other people \_\_\_\_\_ Television (station \_\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_ Radio (station \_\_\_\_\_)

Other \_\_\_\_\_ (specify) \_\_\_\_\_ What source did you use least? \_\_\_\_\_

9. What was your most credible & reliable source of information about the attack?

\_\_\_\_\_

10. What was the least credible & reliable source?

\_\_\_\_\_

10. Who did you think of contacting first after the attack? \_\_\_\_\_

11. Second? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

12. Who contacted you first? \_\_\_\_\_

13. Describe how your own communication behavior was different from usual in the first 72 hours (3 days) following the attack:

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14. Which of the following did you do more or less than normal **in the first 72 hours** (3 days) following the attack?

Made contact with local friends and family	more	the same	less often
Made contact with distant friends and family	more	the same	less often
Talked with strangers in public places	more	the same	less often
Been more polite with strangers in public places	more	the same	less often
Watched TV	more	the same	less often
Listened to radio	more	the same	less often
Read newspapers	more	the same	less often
Look for news	more	the same	less often
Look for entertainment	more	the same	less often

15. What about in the week after the attack, which of these communication activities did you do more or less of **in the week after the attack**?

Made contact with local friends and family	more	the same	less often
Made contact with distant friends and family	more	the same	less often
Talked with strangers in public places	more	the same	less often
Been more polite with strangers in public places	more	the same	less often
Watched TV	more	the same	less often
Listened to radio	more	the same	less often
Read newspapers	more	the same	less often
Look for news	more	the same	less often
Look for entertainment	more	the same	less often

16. Approximately how many times have you told your story about the attack? \_\_\_\_\_

17. Since the morning of the attack, how often have experienced these characteristics of post-traumatic stress? Circle the most appropriate response.

Heightened Response to Noise	All the time	A Lot	Some	Very Little	Never
Discomfort Being Alone	All the Time	A Lot	Some	Very Little	Never
Difficulty Concentrating	All the Time	A Lot	Some	Very Little	Never
Feeling Angry	All the Time	A Lot	Some	Very Little	Never
Feeling Exhausted	All the Time	A Lot	Some	Very Little	Never
Eating More	All the Time	A Lot	Some	Very Little	Never
Eating Less	All the Time	A Lot	Some	Very Little	Never

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Your name: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Place of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_ Sex : F M

Current Address: \_\_\_\_\_ City: \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_ Ethnicity (optional): \_\_\_\_\_

Highest Grade or Degree Completed: \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Please return before October 26, 2001 to Carol Wilder, Department of Communication,  
The New School, 70 Fifth Avenue, NY, NY 10011

## **Interpersonal Communication and Media Use on 9/11**

**Carol Wilder** ([wilderc@newschool.edu](mailto:wilderc@newschool.edu))  
**Associate Dean, The New School**  
**Chair, Department of Communication**

In-depth interviews of 116 New Yorkers in the days immediately following the attacks on the World Trade Center indicate that both interpersonal communication and media usage were strongly affected by the events of 9/11. People learned about the events very quickly, they talked more, especially to strangers, told their 9/11 stories numerous times, watched far more TV than usual, and most experienced symptoms of post traumatic stress.

Not only was there a rush of calls between friends and family on 9/11, but in addition more than half of those interviewed reported talking more and being more polite to strangers in public places. Fewer than ten percent reported no change in communication behavior and fifteen percent (most of them male) reported withdrawal from social life. Forty-one percent said that they were "communicating more" in general.

Apparently, a significant amount of this communication involved storytelling related to 9/11 events. On average, those interviewed reported telling their "9/11 story" ("What did you experience directly on 9/11?") an average of twenty-four times, with several claiming one hundred tellings.

(A similar study following San Francisco's 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake found an average of twenty-two storytellings.) One-third of those interviewed were eye-witnesses to the events, while the rest observed them, like most Americans, on television.. In either case, the sharing of "war stories" can serve cathartic, therapeutic, and community building functions in the wake of an experience as catastrophic as 9/11, especially for those living closest to the events.

Most of the 9/11 stories collected in this study include reactions of shock, disbelief, numbness, fear, and anger: "When the person told me I didn't believe him so I went upstairs and looked out the window, and I was just shocked". . ."It was unbelievable that the center of NYC was attacked in that way". . ."I could not believe the twin towers were unable to bear the crashes". . ."I couldn't believe it and I felt so angry because so many people died". . ."I sat on the sidewalk and watched in disbelief". . ."It was just total disbelief, like everybody says. I hate to be the same in my use of language, but it was total disbelief". . ."It appeared like a scene in a movie". . ."My boyfriend called me and I screamed. It was like something from a movie". . ."The feeling was something in between existing in a movie and a nightmare"

Not surprisingly, more than two-thirds of those interviewed experienced symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress. These symptoms included heightened response to noise (71%), difficulty concentrating (68%), feeling angry (67%), feeling exhausted (64%).

PTSD

Nearly one-third of those interviewed reported changes in eating patterns such as eating more (30%) or eating less (31%).

Increased communication in a crisis with friends and family is to be expected, but there is an interesting pattern in the priorities of contact. When asked "Who did you think of contacting first after the attack?," the most frequently mentioned receivers were "significant other" (26%) and "Mom" (16%) or "Mom and Dad" (15%). "Dad" alone was mentioned as the first call by less than two percent of the respondents. When asked "Who contacted you first?," "Mom" was mentioned by thirteen percent, "Dad" by six percent. The finding that "Mom" was called far more frequently than "Dad" was consistent with the results of the Loma Prieta study. Apparently, it is "Mom" who serves the role of "communication central" in many family networks.

On the morning of 9/11, participants in this study were for the most part at home (44%), at work (24%), or on the way to work (16%). Most (57%) first learned about the attacks from another person, with others reporting that they learned from eyewitness observation (18%), television (18%), or radio (5%). Diffusion of information was very rapid: 65% of those interviewed knew of the attacks by 9 a.m. (before the second plane hit); 79% knew by 9:15 a.m.; and 90% knew by 9:30 a.m.

After the first plane hit, many assumed it was an accident or just did not know what to make of it. When asked "What specific piece of information made you realize the seriousness of the attacks?," 36% reported "when the second plane hit the building." Others reached that conclusion after the attack on the Pentagon (15%), after the towers collapsed (14%), or from the images shown on television (12%). Only seven percent of those interviewed reported understanding the seriousness of the attack "immediately when the first plane hit the building." Nearly one-half (45%) reported hearing the crucial piece of information from television (38% of them from CNN) and 22% from another person. Eighteen percent made the observation first-hand. (In the Loma Prieta earthquake study, the piece of information that convinced most people of the seriousness of the event was news that the Bay Bridge had collapsed.)

Television was by far the most used medium immediately following the 9/11 attacks (81%), and CNN was by far the most frequently cited channel (56%). This can be accounted for in part because the loss of the transmitting tower on the WTC made conventional reception difficult at best, making cable use almost imperative. Radio was depended upon relatively little (11%), perhaps in part because of the exceptionally visual and cinematic nature of the events themselves. CNN was also cited as the most credible and reliable source of information about the attack by 76%



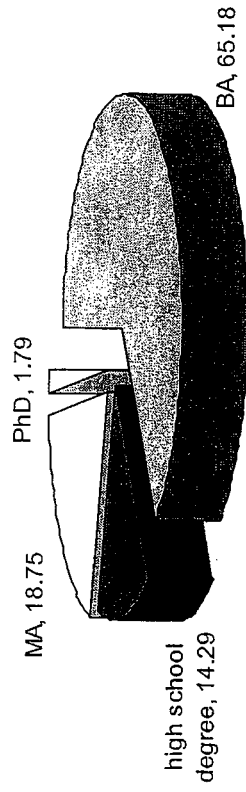
of those interviewed. When asked to identify the “least credible source,” 60% identified “other people.”

Radio was not widely used by those interviewed, with 54% reporting that it was their least used medium in the days immediately following the attack. Still, an arresting sight around Manhattan on the morning of the attack was groups of people huddled around cars in the streets, straining for news from car radios. (After the Loma Prieta quake, radio was the most frequently used medium because a power outage blacked out television for most of a day.)

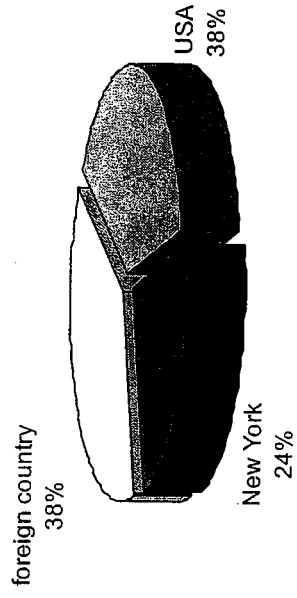
If there is a silver lining to an event such as 9/11, it may be that -- if only for a moment -- it shocks people into taking time out from the daily onslaught of life to reach out to family, friends, and strangers alike. In a city like New York, reputed for its hardness and self-sufficiency, this is no small wonder. There may be something to be learned from communication in crisis about building connections and community, if only we can heed the lesson.

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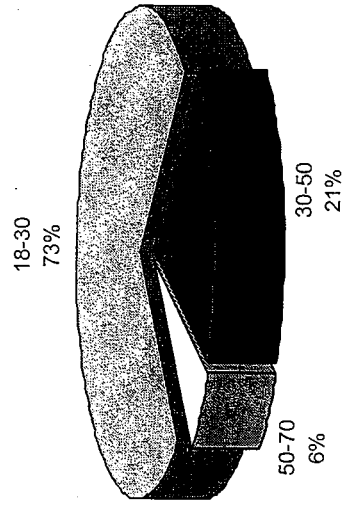
Highest degree completed



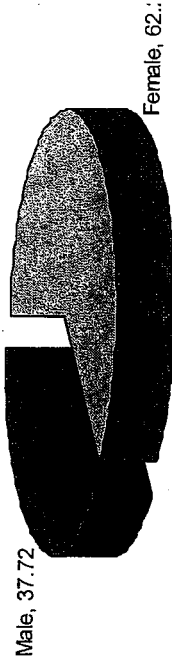
Place of birth



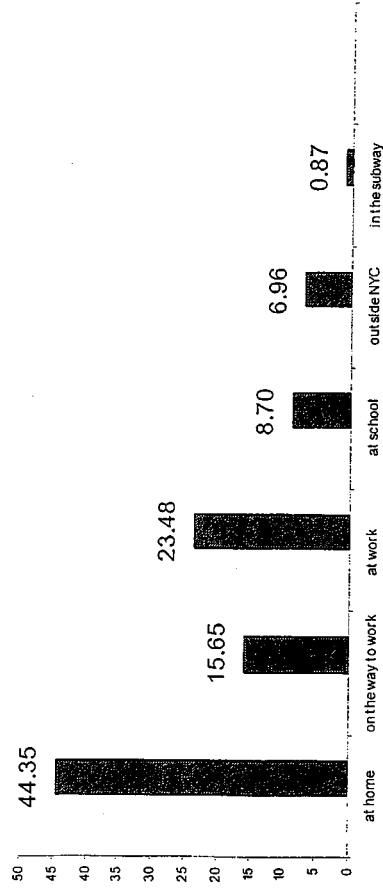
Age



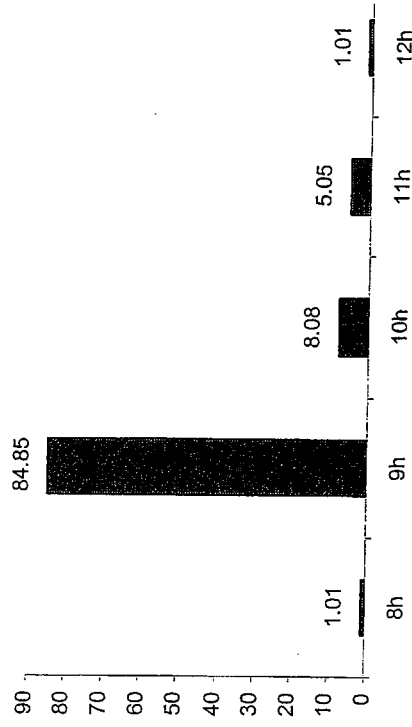
Sex



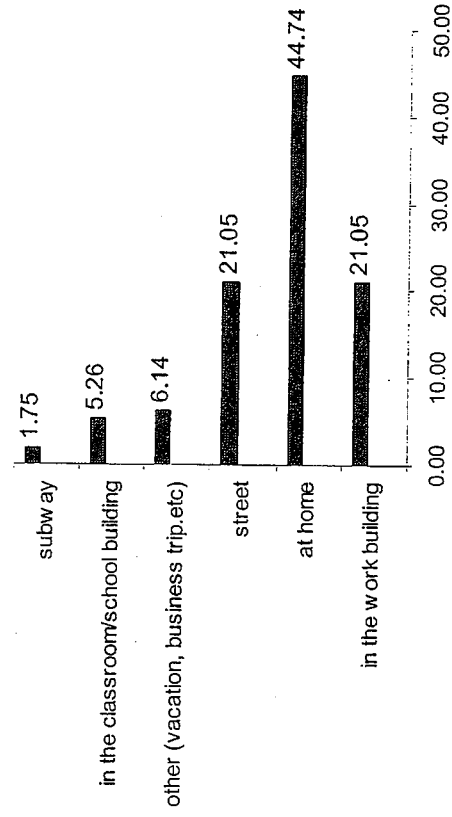
Where were you when you first learned of the September 11th attacks (%)?



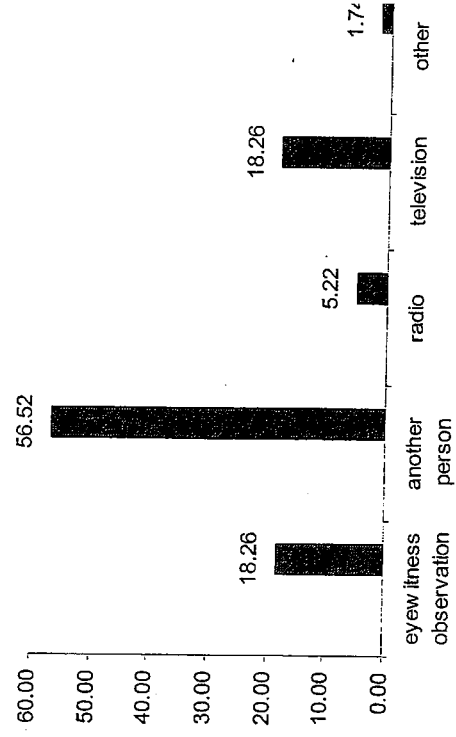
What time was it (%)?



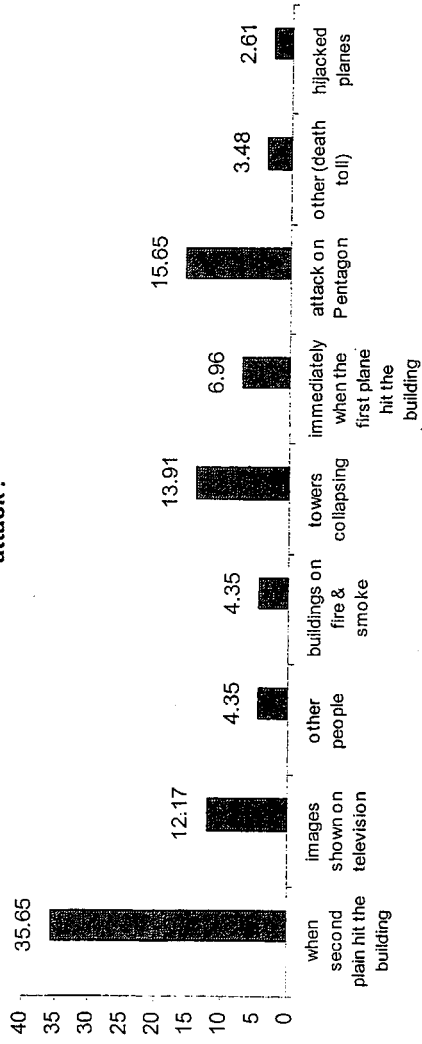
What was your precise location when you first heard (%)?



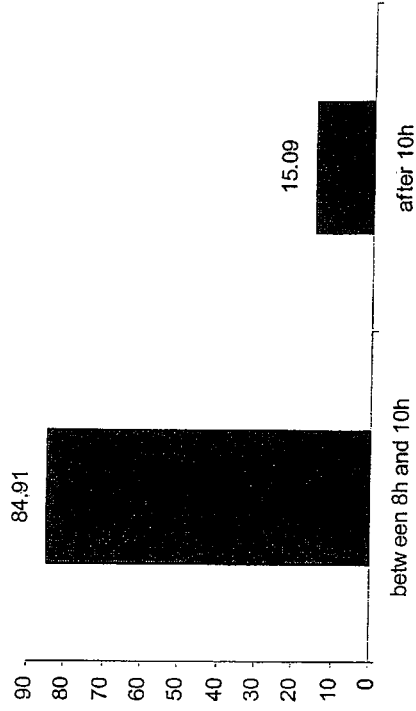
How did you first learn of the attacks?



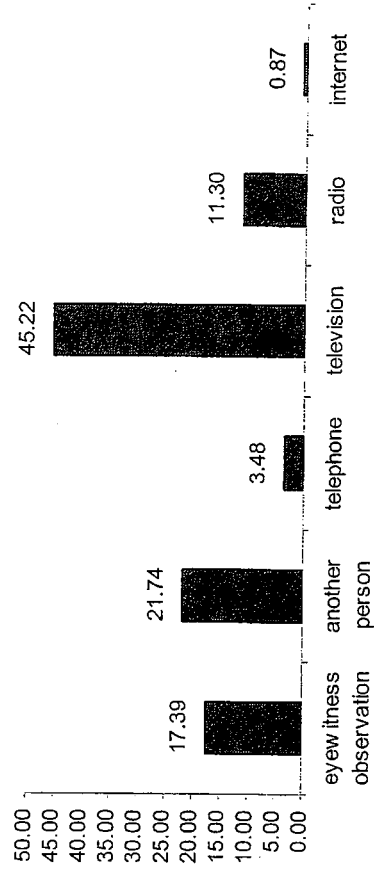
What specific piece of information made you realize the seriousness of the attack?



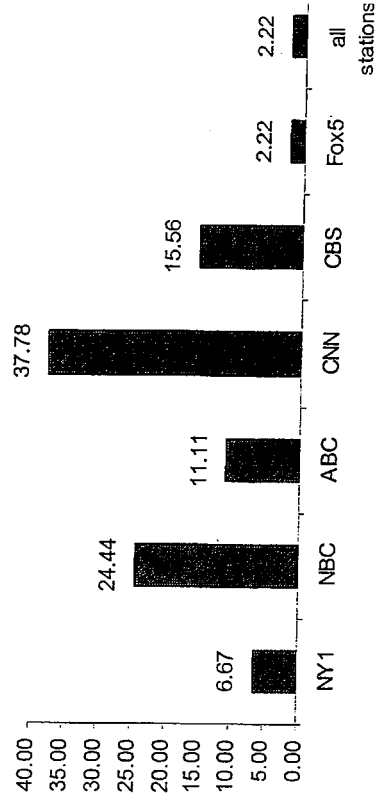
What time was it?



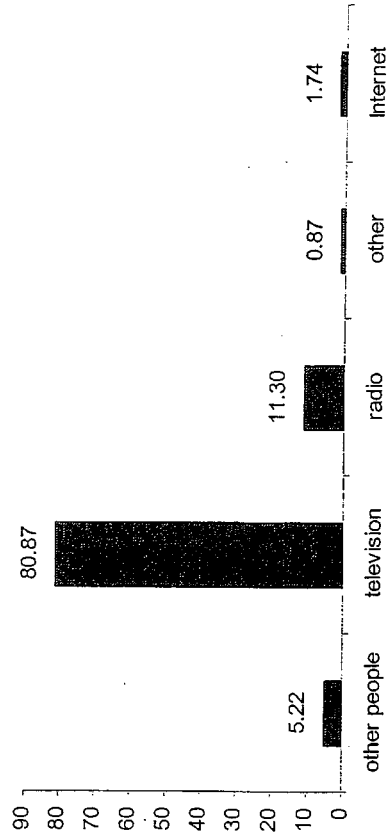
How did you hear this piece of information?



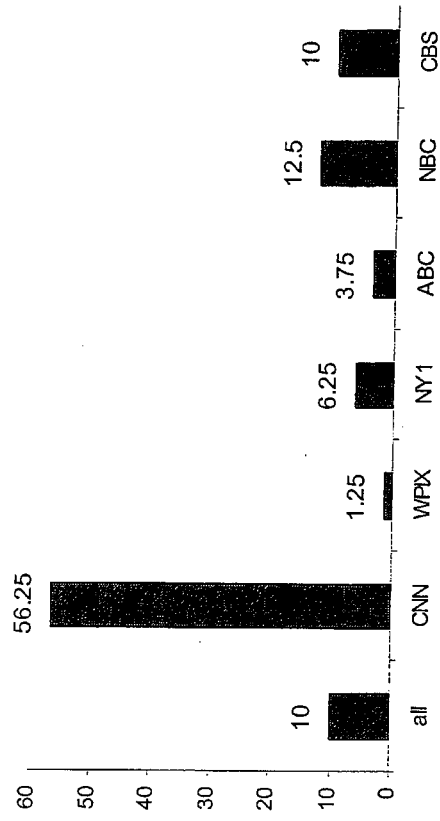
What TV station?



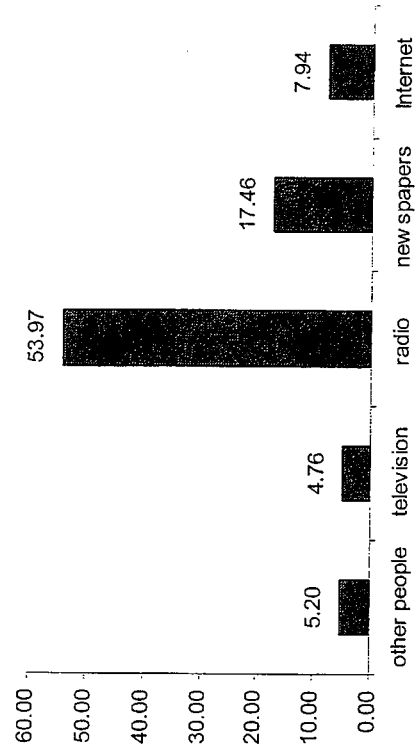
What information source did you use most during 12 hours following the attack?



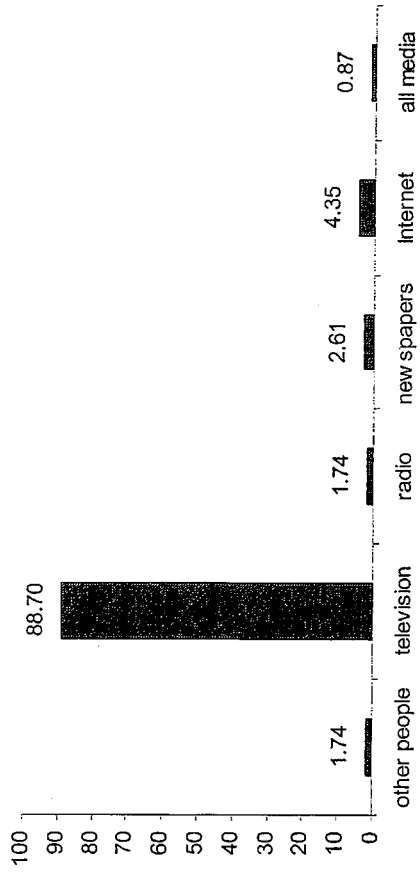
What TV station?



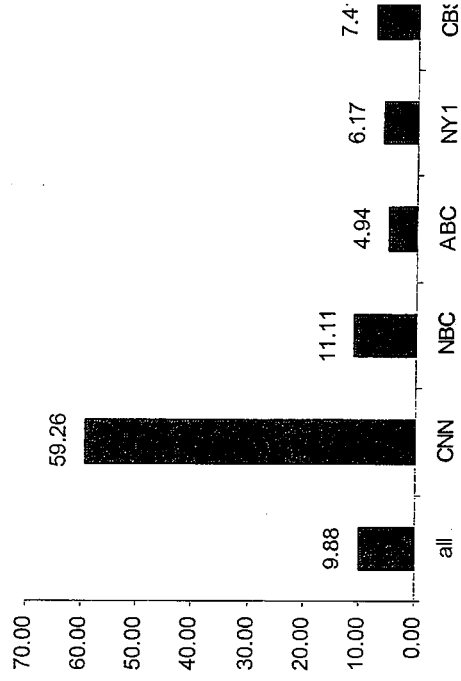
What information source did you use least in 12 hours following the attack?



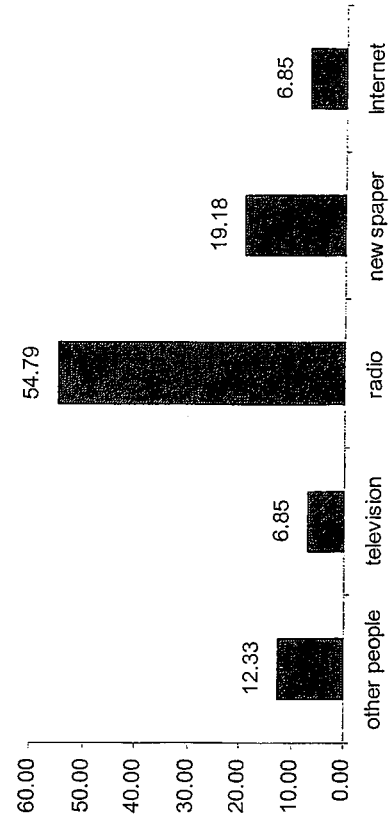
What information source did you use in the 3 days following the attack?



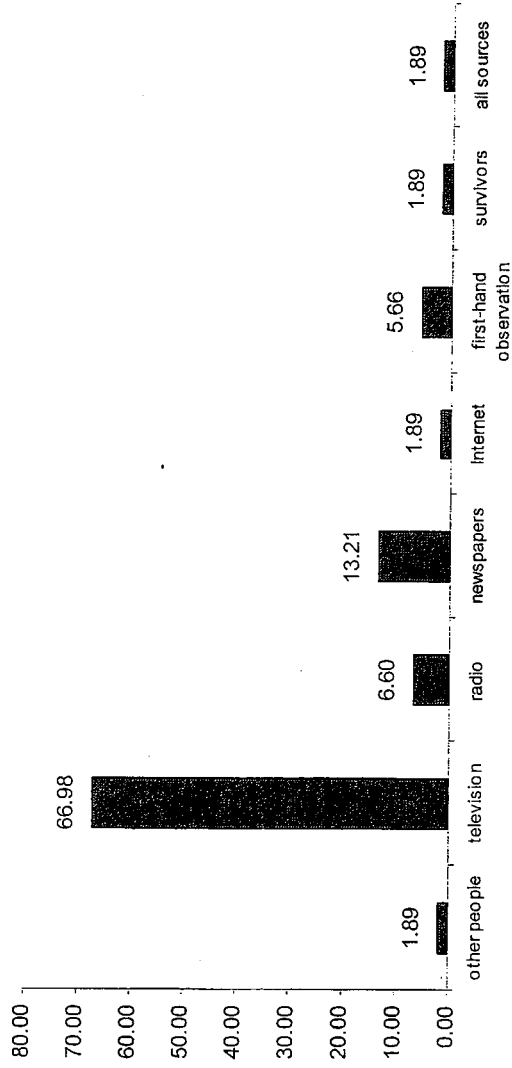
What TV station?



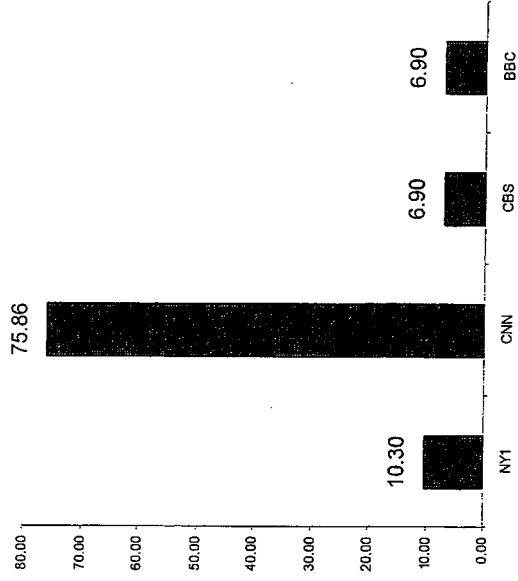
What information source did you use least in the 3 following the attack?



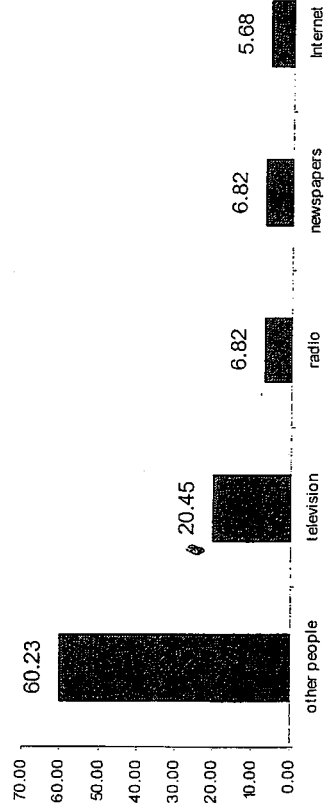
What was your most credible & reliable source of information about the attack?



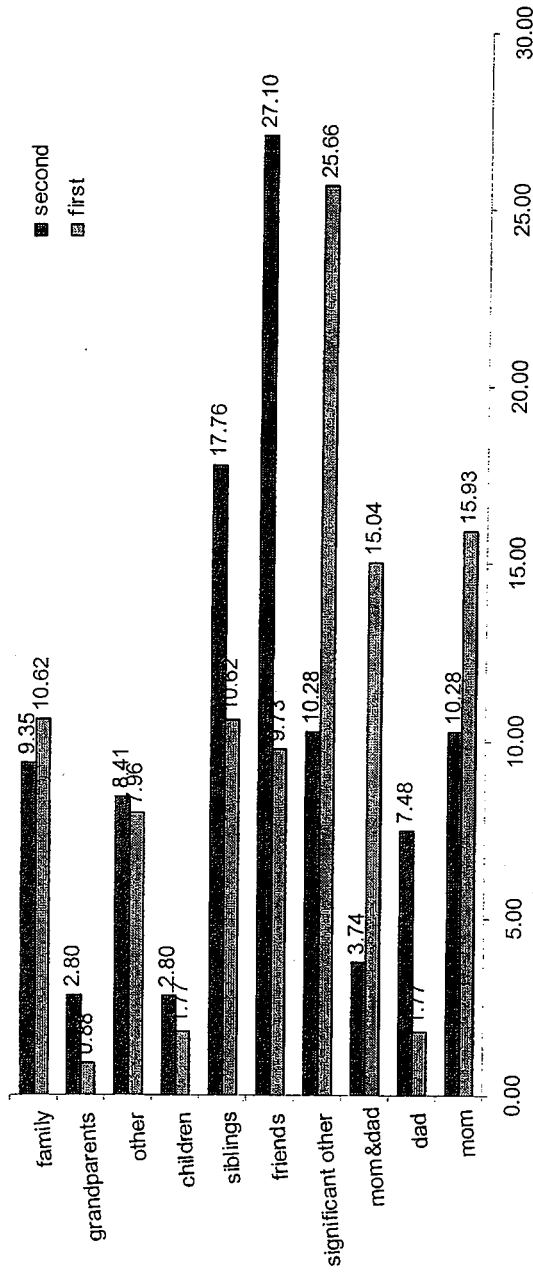
What TV station?



What was your least credible & reliable source?

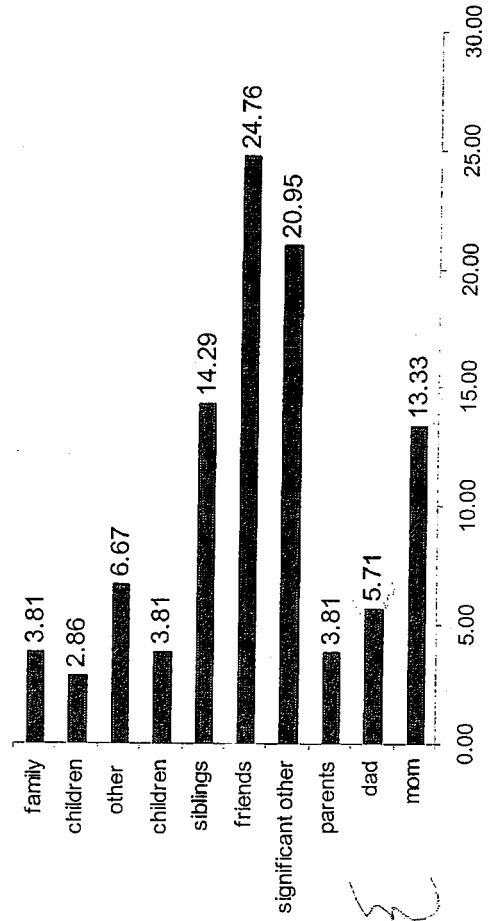


Who did you think of contacting first/second after attack?



first total  
11.71  
M total 11.04  
D 1.77  
M 17.76  
X 2.79  
second  
MND 3.74  
10.28  
21.50

Who contacted you first?



first 32.34  
21.50  
total 53.84



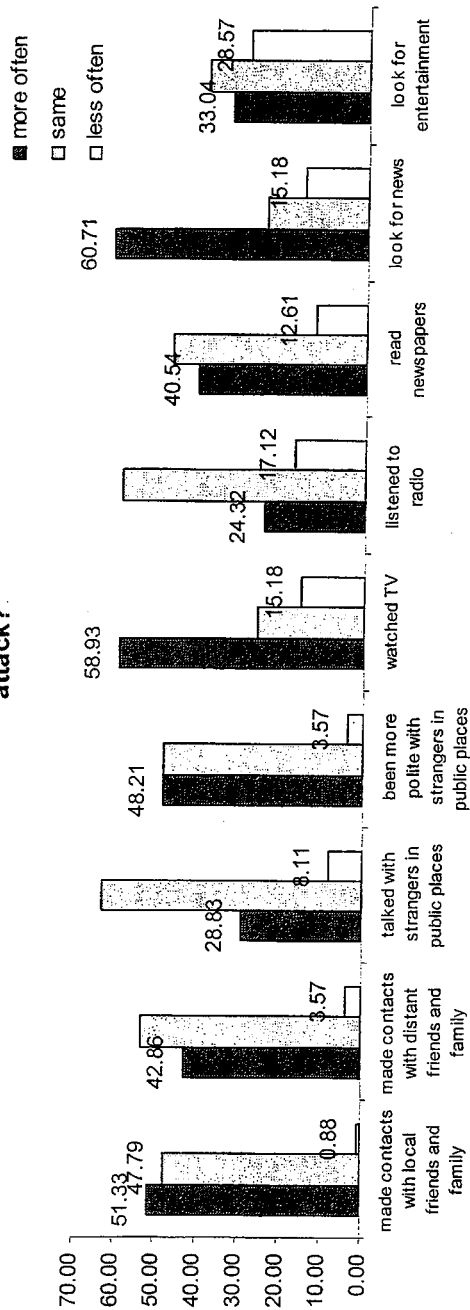
Symptom	Frequency
breaks in communication	3.85
not enough information, feeling of censorship	2.88
panic, shock	3.85
expressing my feelings more openly	6.73
very emotional	3.85
uneffectiveness at work, no concentration	1.92
communicating more	41.35
no difference	8.65
withdrawal from social life and depression	15.38
watching a lot of TV	11.54

A bar chart with three series: 'more often' (dark bars), 'the same' (medium bars), and 'less often' (light bars). The y-axis represents percentages from 0.00 to 100.00. The x-axis lists eight activities. Data values are labeled above each bar.

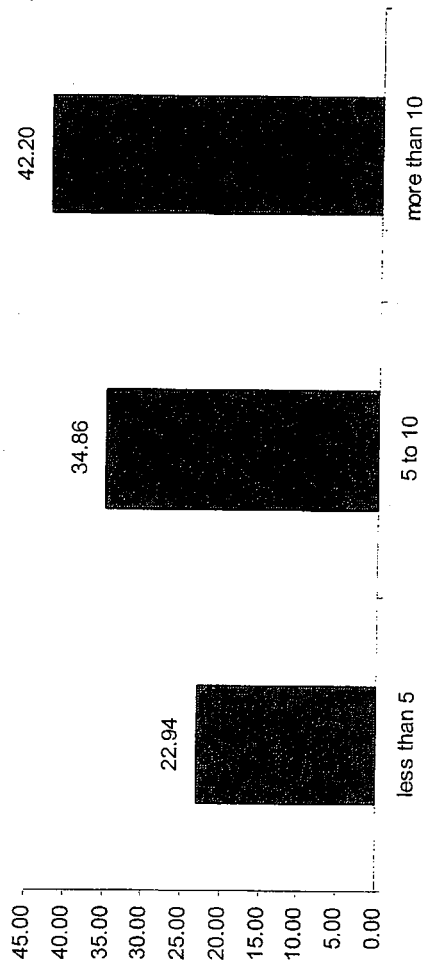
Activity	more often	the same	less often
made contacts with local friends and family	76.11	1.24	2.65
made contacts with distant friends and family	66.96	9.46	3.57
talked with strangers in public places	56.64	37.17	6.19
been more polite with strangers in public places	56.25	1.07	2.68
watched TV	89.38	7.08	3.54
listened to radio	30.09	60.18	9.73
read newspapers	52.21	38.05	9.73
look for news	85.84	0.62	3.54
look for entertainment	16.84	23.01	60.18

entertainment

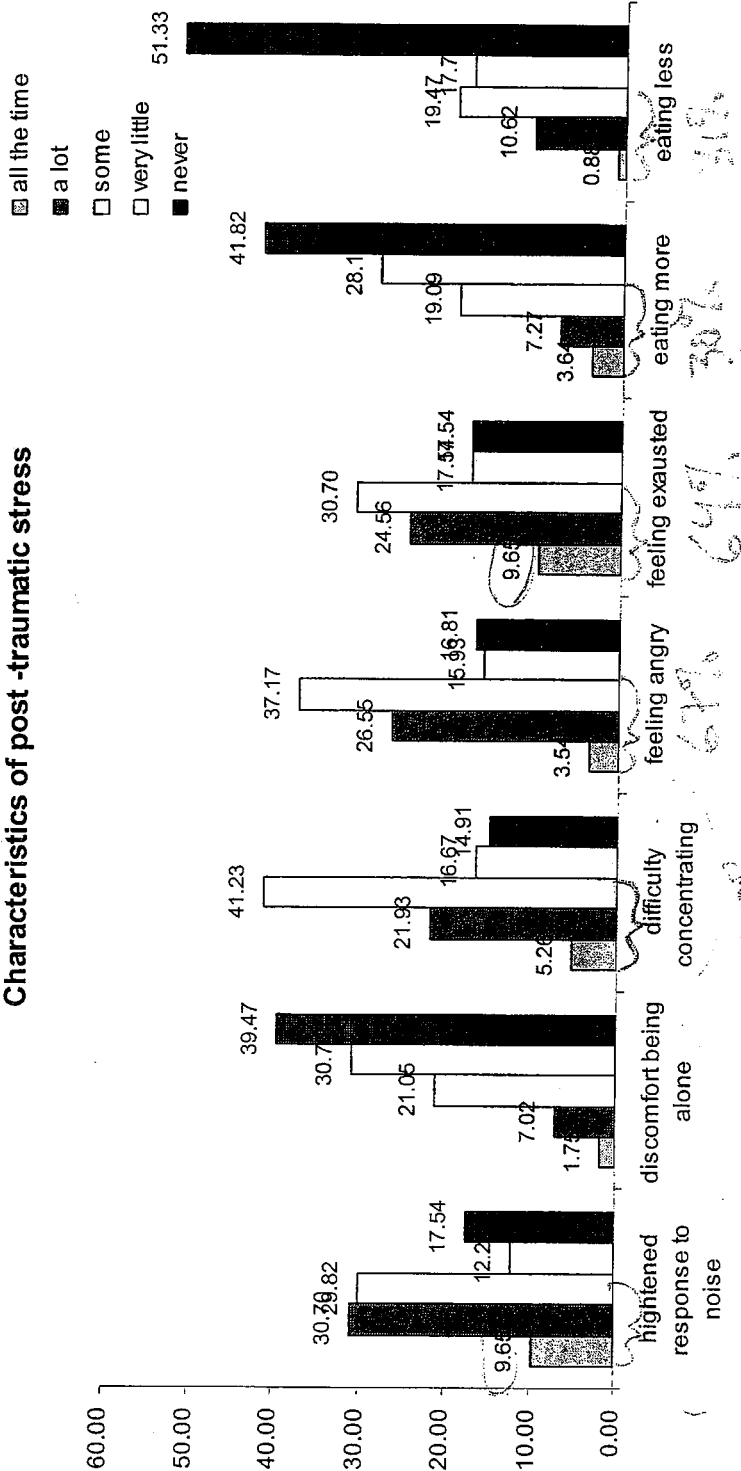
Which of the following did you do more or less than normal in the week after the attack?



Approximately how many times have you told your story about the attack?



# Characteristics of post-traumatic stress



more than two-thirds