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**Intro:** Welcome to the Let’s Talk Government Podcast. A podcast that is provided for you by the department of government at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Located in Minnesota in the United States. I am your host Dr. Pat Nelson, the chairperson of the department of criminal justice. I want to thank you for joining us as we explore different topics related to government. Some may be surprising and some may not, so please enjoy.

**Dr. Nelson:** Welcome to Episode 26 of the let's talk government podcast, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, media, and politics. I'm joined by Dr. Amelia Pridemore from the political science program and the department of government at Minnesota State University, Mankato. I was an active peace officer at the time of the attacks and Dr. Pridemore was a copy editor for the student newspaper, which was a jumping off point into professional journalism, so she covered the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the aftermath for many years. And just a reminder the 9/11 terrorist attacks occurred 20 years ago. So let's start with what was the impact of the media coverage as the attacks were taking place? What do you think?

**Dr. Pridemore:** Just, one of the things that really comes to mind was just the impact of the visuals.So many people saw that second plane hit live as it happened. We really hadn't had, up until Vietnam any way, that sharp visual impact as to what was happening, you know, with war with you know with American tragedy. And then you think about the evolution going up to 9/11 you know 24-hour news like we saw of the Gulf War. Well okay so think about it, there was-- you had two combined forces at the same time, you had visuals, and then you had 24/7 coverage, wall to wall cameras glued on the World Trade Center the whole time. And what happens? All these people see that second plane hit live like everything blow by blow. You see, you see the towers fall when they fell. Overall just some of the visuals that happened really shook the country to the core, to its core even more so than any attack probably ever would have.

**Dr. Nelson:** Yeah, I was one of the ones that watched the second plane hit live. I was in a training and you could like hear the air leave the room, but it also really brought into the focus that it wasn't an accident. Because that was the speculation that maybe it was an accident that the plane and hit the first tower because there were many people that saw that. But that really brought into focus it's not an accident and then you start hearing about the Pentagon has been attacked and that they've lost a lost a plane. So, yeah, that immediate first 24 hours of news coverage really like put it right up in your face the United States was being attacked so. So we've got visuals. So, what kind of morphed, of you know that first 24 hours it's all about the destruction that's going on, what kind of morphed out of that?

**Dr. Pridemore:** You know one of the things I just thought was at that moment like right when it happened. I'm talking about the [inaudible], I’m talking about the media, I’m talking very, very immediate. I saw, not only on television and, you know, through the grapevine, but I also just personally saw you know people at their finest in journalism. I mean, you had people who were literally running towards the towers as they fell to be able to bring that video of those images and just that just bring the story home. Make people feel like they were there and feel the impact of what was happening. You know people, there were journalists who literally risked their lives to cover this. Just even on the local level I knew of people who were working sometimes 24 hours or more. You know, there were people I knew who were putting out multiple editions of a given newspaper at one time. People who stayed on the air more than 24 hours you know because they just had a sense of duty. We are here to keep people informed, let them know what's going on, especially in a crisis mode like this right now. Let's give them the facts. And, you know, there were people I know who, you know, seems like they went a week without a shower and just trying to get that and just trying to get the story out but get it right. And not only that too, but you had, and this was very debated at the time, one thing that you had to do under all of that pressure was you had to make sure that you were acting with the appropriate sensitivity while trying to show the appropriate impact. So, one thing that I that just, you know, I myself sometimes had to do when I was cutting copy or deciding what to run sometimes, you know there were debates as to whether or not video or images of people jumping to their deaths from the towers should have been aired or should have been printed or not.

**Dr. Nelson:** Right.

**Dr. Pridemore:** There was a-- one newspaper that used a term, that's generally used-- generally thought of as profanity, for their one-word headline with a picture of the second plane hitting. And that was debated because it was thought to be; well this captures what Americans were feeling versus ok like seriously, what are you doing, right?

**Dr. Nelson:** Right.

**Dr. Pridemore:** You had to, you had to do a huge balancing act under some of the god awfullest pressure ever in terms of just getting it right. And, you know I mentioned the moments that the second plane hit. So, one of my friends who was already, he had already gone pro, by this point he moved on from student papers, and he was working in his newsroom and they had already all but put together the day's paper and they were going to put it out, send it out when somebody was watching TV and said, “hey, a plane just hit the World Trade Center!” “What really?” And they all go the TV and then he says, “the second plane hit, we watched it live,” he said we all said, “oh my god, the world is going to change forever.” We tore up the front page and we got to it.

**Dr. Nelson:** Yeah and you know when you brought up the point about the jumpers you know, most of the footage I have seen has been very respectful where they pull back to the wide shot and they were consciously doing that. Because if you wanted to sensationalize it yes you could have zoomed right in, but they were being very respectful of people that had the choice of no choice, whatsoever, to try to just get out of the burning building. I also recently saw a documentary that showed people—journalists, photo journalists that were pulling people into safety you know as the building was coming down and the white cloud is coming at them, you know, get in here get in here instead of worrying about the shots so much as helping people and I think it's important that people remember you know journalists are people and the videographers and photo photographers are people and they really did show that.

**Dr. Pridemore:** I noticed that too. Yeah, it was sometimes too, it's like this sometimes objectivity is one of the you know, objectivity does matter in media, believe me it does.

But at the same time it's sort of like moments like these are ones where you have to really consider the fact that you are human, and likewise, consider perhaps being more of a human in not only what you're doing behind the scenes but also what you put out there. So while I wasn't on the ground in New York City or in Washington DC or in Pennsylvania at the time of 9/11, I was definitely on the ground in the Hurricane Katrina aftermath in Louisiana. And I remember just, you know, sometimes, sometimes you know when somebody was crying I gave them a hug because you know what was I going to do? Was I just going to stand there like a robot? And that's sometimes one of the things that you have to do in that line of work is consider just how far your humanity will be allowed to go. It's, it's a lot-- it's extremely difficult. And you have to know how far you're going to let your humanity spill out onto your pages or not. And it's, there were there were moments, a lot of moments during my career, not just 9/11, not just Katrina, not just the Iraq War, where I just sometimes I had to, you know, go home and just sit in silence for a while and just try to shut out the day.

**Dr. Nelson:** Yeah it's important to have your [inaudible]. All right, so we know that there was a lot of immediate impact, but we also know that a big political machine started moving as soon as President Bush got notification that plane had just flown into the towers, we were under attack. So let's start talking about the media and politics from that perspective. How-- what happened? Was the media able to run free and do their normal objective reporting or where there some constraints that were put on?

**Dr. Pridemore:** So the constraints were really, they weren't legal, but they were a mix of a sort of a stage that was set ahead of time, in terms of who was in control of the media, like, in terms of corporate ownership. And likewise, there was a lot of political dialogue and also just the public at large you know every— “the average citizen” quote unquote. So one of the things that really set the stage, even before 9/11 but it really had an impact on the media environment, during immediate aftermath and, you know, today. One of the biggest policy pieces that came about not too terribly before 9/11 was the Telecommunications Act of 1996. So, this was something that's far less emotional than coverage of 9/11, but it definitely set the stage. So basically what the Telecommunications Act of 1996 did, in a nutshell, was it eliminated a whole lot of ownership restrictions on media outlets. Namely on how many outlets, radio, TV, print, etc., how many a given company could own, how many period. How many of them could be owned in a single market. The idea-- the reason why there were restrictions on such was the greater idea of democracy and a marketplace of ideas. The theory was that if you had more than one voice out there, meaning more than one company's perspective in the public sphere, you had a more democratic discourse. But what happened with telecom act of 1996 as well as a lot of other media deregulation that happened before and after, was that where ownership limits were repealed and repealed and repealed, you have the situation where so few could own so much. And where so few could own so much, so few could control the overall message.

**Dr. Nelson:** So, I mean, just to remind our listeners the role of the media in a healthy democracy is to be a watchdog and to hold your government accountable. So if you have an owner that owns all the media in a geographic area, I mean how many different news reporters do they need at that point or how many different news programs do they need, Dr. Pridemore?

**Dr. Pridemore:** Well for one thing I know, just personally from working at work, knowing and working with a lot of people who have been affected by these buyouts, what often happens is the first thing that happens is especially if two outlets are bought by the same company and they're geographically close, they'll combine staffs. They'll say okay we're just going to lay off this many people or we're just going to get rid of the entire staff over here. So yeah they'll literally combined staffs to save money. And then have some-- now in the digital age it goes as far as somebody in Tennessee can be doing page layout for a newspaper in Illinois. It's gone that far down. But yeah, especially if they're geographically close though they start absolutely cutting staff. So not only do you have one owner but actually they start literally cutting down the number of people who are creating content.

**Dr. Nelson:** So you could have one point of view that is covering a large area on multiple stations or multiple channels. I know that we could probably spend a whole podcast talking

**Dr. Pridemore:** Yeah

**Dr. Nelson:** But let's kind of steer it back towards the 9/11. I mean what were the things that set the stage for our media after 9/11?

**Dr. Pridemore:** Well like I mentioned with the buyouts and with so much airtime and so much message controlled by so few, what happened was, there was a greater ability to put the lid on anything that was deemed to be dangerous, unpopular, unpatriotic. So, one thing that happened immediately was that basically the media went by and large into a sort of-- it was just this you know, ok sure, whatever you say. Whatever you say Mr. President, talking about the bush administration, ok sure we'll put the flag on the front page ok. We're going to go to war? Great. There was no questioning of anything, but the thing is, is if you did act like the appropriate watchdog and ask questions, the thing was is the public at large, much less your employer, would absolutely have your head. And this happened in mainstream media, this happened in entertainment. And some people, especially in the entertainment industry, lost their careers over this.

**Dr. Nelson:** How did that work? How did the entertainers lose their careers?

**Dr. Pridemore:** Well one that's only eventually made a comeback and big way, but one big one, again this goes back to the ownership example, was the clear channel list was first. So clear channel communications had literally bought out station after station after station before 9/11 happened. So what happened was they distributed a list of songs right after the attacks that they deemed too dangerous to be aired, to insensitive to be playing on the station at that time. But a lot of the music was considered, you know some of the choices were considered to be really strange. Such as the song “I Fall to Pieces,” is considered to be-- just you know some of the choices were just considered to be too literal. And then the other thing was a lot of the artists who wound up on the list were ones that were known for having views that were counter to the Bush administration such as Rage Against the Machine whose entire catalog was placed on that list. And some of it was just really strange and the thing is, is clear channel denies this was an actual policy that they made people follow when the President-- when one of their top executives sent this out to all of their outlets you know. Oh my gosh the boss of this, well, right?

**Dr. Nelson: Right.**

**Dr. Pridemore:** So most of them did follow that list. So what happens is when you have so few owning so much, ok instead of you know one radio station in Nebraska banning the entire Rage Against the Machine catalog, you've got this huge blanket blackout of all of this stuff. But I think one of the big ones was especially when entertainers, journalists, etc. really asked the question or even criticized the Bush administration and some of their some of their policies. Particularly the war in Afghanistan and especially the war in Iraq, big example is The Chicks, formerly known as the Dixie Chicks,

**Dr. Nelson:** Right.

**Dr. Pridemore:** yeah they basically voiced their opinions against the Iraq war. What happened was, basically, remember station after station? Well just one conglomerate band, The Chicks, over and over and over again. And it was actively encouraged too by, not only these media outlets, but also the public at large you know having special events where they bulldoze the band CDs. So the thing was is, you know, if you even thought about asking a question like is this really a good idea? You wound up getting absolutely tarred and feathered by not only people in the political sphere, other media outlets, but also just the public. Because one thing I said is you know right after 9/11, especially you know first you're just in tears, but then you want blood.

**Dr. Nelson:** Right, right.

**Dr. Pridemore:** And I think when you have that huge desire for blood but somebody saying, you know, was the Government of Iraq really involved in this? What's this about uranium, I really don't know. Oh man, you were done for. And you know just in terms of other public figures, Valerie Plame and Joseph Wilson.

**Dr. Nelson:** Right.

**Dr. Pridemore:** It was extremely dangerous to be asking questions when they really did need to be asked especially when you're talking about matters of going to war. Just like right now with what we're seeing with Afghanistan, or what’s in Afghanistan. You know, a lot of people are asking questions about what happened to lead to what we've seen in Afghanistan. These questions were not asked in 2001.

**Dr. Nelson:** Well you know and it's really interesting that you bring this up because Senator Barbara Lee, when she voted against granting the president the powers to use a legal authorization to use military force three days after the 9/11 attacks, that got buried. And I am sure because most of the media outlets couldn't touch it without pretty much imploding it was just one **[inaudible]** dissented and that was it. So you never really got to hear the reasons why, which is kind of part of that watchdog role but on the other hand, I mean they were scared to do that because your bosses are telling you no and your government's telling you don't talk about anything. That's not patriotic and we’ll deem what's patriotic or not.

**Dr. Pridemore:** And in terms of deeming what's patriotic or not. What did air and what did get printed was really questionable too. Not only was it a real regurgitation of a lot of talking points, but two big ones that really come to mind are the stories of Jessica Lynch and Pat Tillman. You know, they were-- the way that their stories were spun by the United States government were, you know, it made the perfect human interest story that the, not only the media, but just the public in general. Sometimes we got to-- we can't just blame the media sometimes we got to look at ourselves in the mirror and ask of what's happened**. [inaudible].** Who was influencing who right? But, Jessica Lynch. She even said when she had to testify in front of Congress she's like this whole story was false. They made me out to be, quote, as she put it “a little girl Rambo,” when she's like I didn't even fire a shot. Pat Tillman who is as some of you listeners may or may not know, was an NFL player who quit the NFL after 9/11 to become an Army Ranger. He was killed in Afghanistan and the narrative spun was that you know he was fighting the enemy and it turned out that he was killed by friendly fire. And his family were you know, once they found out they were just disgusted that you know their son or brother was used as this propaganda tool basically especially after, you know regardless of how he died. I mean the guy died serving his country and gave up an NFL career to you know for 9/11. And the thing was is that was used precisely because you know, oh wow this guy who just had a heck of a story behind him. Wow, what now that he's gone what could we do to really draw people in? And a lot of the narratives around you know the Pat Tillman story, the Jessica Lynch story, they've often been blamed as, at that time, really pumping up the public into supporting the bush administration's policies in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

**Dr. Nelson:** And for our listeners that don't know the Jessica Lynch story she was in an ordinance unit in the army and their caravan took a wrong turn basically went wrong turn into more hostile territory. Several, I think it was nine, in her caravan were killed and several were taken prisoner. And she was a very petite, blonde, very American looking female. She was rescued by special forces from a hospital and there was a huge narrative. I mean they called a press conference as they were coming back to the base with her about saving her from being a prisoner of war and that yeah she had fought everybody off and you know the different narrative that comes out much later is they took a wrong turn and they went into the wrong area and she was captured with some injuries. It is interesting to see how that was played out. I had totally forgotten about both of those until you mentioned it. Alright so who started doing the watchdog role of the media first after 9/11? Who got brave and started questioning this?

**Dr. Pridemore:** Some of the people who really got brave and started questioning this first were actually satirical comedians, you know, most famously some of them were Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, were the ones who did the news parody shows. And the thing about Stewart and Colbert, so Stewart was parroting news programming but the thing was is he showed this kind of a skepticism, namely about the Iraq war, but also a lot of what mainstream media was doing. Like one example was that he showed 1000 times, was he showed some talking points that came straight from the White House press team and he says surely the press questioned this and he showed footage of reporter after reporter after reporter from so many different news outlets parroting these things word for word. And also just really dug into the whole political dialogue, like for example when, one of bush sec-- Scott McClellan one of Bush's press secretaries left his job. It was, Jon Stewart did this bit with one of his correspondence where they said, what happens to Scott McClellan now? Well, he goes through the traditional thing that White House press secretaries always have to do when they leave and that's being cleansed of all of the absolute bull that they have had to digest and spit out for however long that they were working as a White House press secretary. So you know there was this, -- the thing was is, you know kind of like what I say about satire, and we've talked about that on this on this podcast before, you know when you laugh, why were you laughing? I always say, why are you laughing?

**Dr. Nelson:** Because you're like, oh my gosh that's so true and uncomfortable and why do we put up with it.

**Dr. Pridemore:** Now Colbert took it to the next level because, as some maybe even some of my younger students may know, Colbert got his start playing a character on the old Colbert Report, which came on right after Jon Stewart's Daily Show, and the character he played was of a you know one of these conservative pundits you know Bill O'Reilly Sean Hannity type. And really it was a critique on a lot of the political communication. You particularly saw a lot of pundits and even the graphics and whatnot were a total parody on such. Tons of American flags, eagles flying around all over the place, right. And he even called the content that he was putting out truthiness. And somehow some media scholars have criticized you know the rise of Stewart and Colbert and they're growing of prominence during this time as you know our descent into infotainment. But to be quite honest with you in a lot of ways they were the ones who really started taking the watchdog role up a notch. And the thing was I think they had a little bit of an advantage with them versus mainstream media because they were able to kind of deflect some criticism and be like; oh, look at me I'm fun, I'm just telling jokes. By the way, watch what they were doing with the White House talking points wasn’t that's so funny? Why are you laughing?

**Dr. Nelson:** Right. Well I know we could spend hours talking about this. So why don't we do some what are your some of your closing thoughts about the impact of 9/11 terrorist attacks and media and politics here? As we carry forward into the future.

**Dr. Pridemore:** It's sort of like, so you know the media did get its groove back, particularly when the Iraq War went south. Remember it was controversial at the time for NBC News to use the term Civil War around when around the mid-2000s to late the 2000s when the Iraq situation had just gone to pieces. And eventually did get its groove back in a way, especially when the Iraq War really went south. The problems been is that with the constant erosion, particularly in media regulation, this result in buyouts, buyouts and more buyouts. On top of that we have literally lost a lot of the viewpoints that we would have that would provide a check on it. So, we started out with this, with these heroic journalists, we wound up in this point where we were just kind of parroting talking points and not really asking questions. And then when we start, by the time we really start asking questions and we really started playing that role and we actually we the public allow journalists to do this, all of a sudden all these newspapers start folding. These places get bought out and kind of like what they say about democracy, especially after January 6th, you don't know what you have until it's gone. You don't know what kind of an asset you have until it's gone and one of the assets the press is for us, a free press, is that watchdog role but so much of that kind of went down. And for a while, it was recovering and recovering and recovering but the financial and regulatory situation never let it fully recover. You don't know what you have until it's gone and I think a lot of people are noticing that right now.

**Dr. Nelson:** Well thank you Dr. Pridemore. I always love having these discussions with you because it helps remind me of the role of media in democracy and you’re right you don’t know what you’re missing. You can turn on the news now and it probably doesn’t matter what station, you’re hearing some things so. Thank you for joining me I appreciate it.

**Dr. Pridemore:** Thanks!

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