Revenge in U.S. and Canadian News Magazines Post-9/11

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Abstract: A content analysis of U.S. and Canadian news magazines was conducted to determine the incidence of revenge words and phrases following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the Twin Towers, New York; whether revenge was associated with justifications of evil and/or photographic reinforcements; and whether these contents differed between the two countries. Issues from September 17, 2001, to January 14, 2002, of the major news magazines from the two countries were examined; 698 articles were identified as relating to September 11. The Canadian magazine Maclean’s presented significantly more revenge words and phrases than either of the two other magazines. In contrast, the solely U.S. magazine, Newsweek, presented evil justifications significantly more than the magazines containing Canadian content, Maclean’s and the Canadian edition of Time. The results were presented in the context of exposure to magazines being a source of learning of revenge motives, attitudes, and behaviours.

Résumé : Nous avons fait une analyse de contenu de magazines d’actualité américains et canadiens afin d’évaluer : combien ces magazines renfermaient de phrases et de mots vengeurs à la suite de l’attaque terroriste des Tours jumelles à New York le 11 septembre 2001; si ces propos vengeurs s’associaient à des justifications du mal et/ou des renforcements photographiques; et s’il y avait des différences de contenu entre les deux pays. Nous avons examiné les numéros du 17 septembre 2001 au 14 janvier 2002 des trois principaux magazines d’actualité des deux pays et nous avons identifié 698 articles se rapportant au 11 septembre. Le magazine canadien Maclean’s comprenait beaucoup plus de phrases et de mots vengeurs que les deux autres magazines. En revanche, Newsweek, le seul magazine entièrement américain des trois, comprenait beaucoup plus de justifications du mal que les magazines à contenu canadien, c’est-à-dire Maclean’s et la version canadienne de Time. L’idée sous-tendant nos résultats est que la lecture de tels magazines peut encourager l’apprentissage de motivations, d’attitudes et de comportements vengeurs.

Keywords: Content analysis; September 11th; Canadian magazines/revenge; U.S. magazines/revenge

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Revenge is a behaviour that occurs in many people’s lives (Barreca, 1995)—in romantic relationships; between friends and family members (Emerson, Ferris, & Gardner, 1998; Kim & Smith, 1993; Yoshimura, 2004); in the workplace (Tripp, Bies, & Aquino, 2002); among opposing groups in society (Baumeister, 1997); and between countries (Frijda, 1994). The term is used interchangeably with words and expressions such as retribution, retaliation, “getting even,” and vengeance by most researchers (for example, Frijda, 1994; Uniacke, 2000; Vidmar, 2000), and it refers to inflicting suffering, injury, punishment, or other damage in response to a perceived wrongdoing. How one acquires the motivations, behaviours, and justifications for revenge is a question that has not received the attention of researchers, although it is assumed that these elements are learned and maintained through interactions with others, such as parents and peers. One additional source, however, may be exposure to representations in media such as television programs and magazines, with media exposure presenting models, justifications, and vicarious reinforcements for revenge. Thus, the overall purpose of this study was to examine whether revenge is represented thematically in magazines and, if so, how it may be justified and pictorially reinforced.

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, were one of the most exhaustively covered news events in human history. Thousands of news reports and opinion pieces were generated; photographs and film images of the devastation, crash sites, survivors, and victims presented the horrific events in graphic detail. Clearly, one of the themes that surfaced was the desire for revenge. Thus, this tragic event and its sequelae provided an opportunity for media researchers to examine how revenge is presented in the media—in this study, in news magazines. The specific purpose of the study was to conduct a content analysis of news magazines (Newsweek, Time Canadian Edition, and Maclean’s) published in the United States and Canada to (a) examine the frequency of presentations of revenge; (b) assess how revenge was justified with attributions of evil and reinforced by emotional photographs; and (c) determine whether this content differed between the two countries. These three news magazines were chosen for analysis because they (a) have the highest circulations in their respective countries (Mediastart, 2002), thus having the greatest potential to impact readers; (b) fall along a continuum of U.S. perspective and content from totally U.S. (Newsweek) to a combination of U.S. and Canadian (Time Canadian Edition), to totally Canadian (Maclean’s); and (c) are published weekly, making it possible to precisely assess the course of revenge themes in news magazines in the months following 9/11.

Examining revenge in these magazines was important for several reasons. First, in many contexts, revenge may be anti-social, inappropriate, irrational, and a destructive method of responding to a perceived wrongdoing (Barreca, 1995; Bies & Tripp, 2001; Jacoby, 1983, Uniacke, 2000). It is important to identify the many sources of exposure to revenge in order to understand how people may become motivated to act in vengeful ways. News-magazine exposure, especially after 9/11, may be one of these sources. Second, news magazines may be a particularly important medium to study because (a) readers can read the articles at their own
pace and re-read and study the articles and pictures of particular interest (unlike television programs), thus making readers more susceptible to their influence (for example, Levine, Smolak, & Hayden, 1994; McLuhan, 1964); and (b) people invest more mental effort and process contents more deeply while reading than when watching television; therefore, they may be more willing to accept the messages contained therein and act accordingly (Merrill & Lowenstein, 1979). For example, several studies have shown that print media influence many attitudes more than television exposure (for example, Fouts & Vaughan, 2002; Harrison & Cantor, 1997). Third, magazine articles may contain models advocating revenge and retaliation (for example, “The people who knocked down the buildings are going to hear all of us soon;” President George Bush, 2001, p.44), justifications (such as the “axis of evil”), and reinforcements (for example, pictures that have emotional content, such as depictions of destruction and facial expressions). This combination of contents is considered the most powerful vicarious exposure in terms of its ability to influence people (Bandura, 1977; Fouts & Burggraf, 2000; Fouts & Vaughan, 2002), resulting in attitude and behaviour change and the stereotyping of particular groups. Thus, an accurate description of presentations of revenge is needed before we can objectively associate such exposure to possible effects and determine who may be more susceptible to these persuasive messages. Finally, the tragic events that unfolded on 9/11 and the ensuing articles in major Canadian and American news magazines provide media researchers with a valuable opportunity to study possible cross-cultural differences in the coverage of major news events. Such variations may reflect national disparities and/or differentially influence the learning of motives and behaviours in the two countries.

Revenge Modelling

Revenge may be discussed and modelled in magazines through the written word; for example, through the use of “revenge words” (such as “retaliation” and “retribution”) and “revenge phrases” (such as “eye-for-an-eye” and “getting even”). These are very common, both in popular usage and in research (Bies, Tripp, & Kramer, 1997; Vidmar, 2000). Revenge in U.S. and Canadian magazines was examined from a point of view sympathetic to the U.S.; that is, the citizens of the U.S. were considered the victims and avengers of the terrorist attacks. In this study, only words and phrases in which vengeful intent was clear were analyzed.

Revenge words and revenge phrases were expected to occur in articles in all three magazines, independent of country, modelling the discussion of, advocacy for, and options concerning retaliation for the 9/11 attacks. A higher frequency of revenge words and phrases was expected in the news magazines with U.S. bases (Newsweek and Time Canadian Edition), however, than from the news magazine with an entirely Canadian origin (Maclean’s). The reasons for this were twofold. First, the acts of terrorism occurred on American soil, and were therefore more immediately relevant to Americans, in the sense, for example, of being an attack on one’s own country, or in the likelihood of having friends or relatives living in the affected areas. Second, revenge and retaliation may be viewed as a means to
prevent future attacks; this would be less important in Canada, since there are likely fewer anti-Canadian than anti-American prejudices around the world.

**Justification**
Baumeister (1997) suggests that revenge often involves justification and emotional processes, such as fear-induction, sympathy for victims, and dehumanization of the “enemy.” The occurrence of such emotional processes enhances vicarious—this is Bandura’s word conditioning (Bandura, 1977), thus likely maintaining their justifications for revenge. One word that encompasses these emotional processes is “evil” (as well as its derivatives). According to Baumeister (1997), “evil” is typically used for behaviours that (a) intentionally produce great harm to victims with an element of cruelty, and (b) involve a considerable discrepancy between the perceptions of the perpetrator(s) and victims, and thus appear particularly unjustified to the victims. The terrorist attacks of September 11th are consistent with these criteria: there was devastating damage to people and property, terrorists were seen to celebrate the attack, and most of the world perceived the attack as unjustified. The attribution of “evil” (from a U.S. perspective) was therefore examined by our study, especially since President Bush labelled the terrorists as such (Bush, 2001) in his justification for retaliation. It was expected that articles containing revenge-related content would also include attributions of evil to the terrorists and/or their acts, with the association of evil and revenge being greater in magazines with U.S. origins.

**Reinforcement**
Photographs associated with articles containing revenge words or phrases may support and/or match the emotional content of the article and may thus arouse similar emotions or amplify the emotions of magazine readers. Such instances of emotional arousal are considered vicarious reinforcements (Bandura, 1969; 1977)—in this case, of the written word. In the present study, only photographs that were relevant to 9/11 and potentially emotionally related to revenge were of interest: emotional facial expressions, destruction associated with terrorism, the terrorists, and American heroes. It was expected that such photographs would occur in articles containing revenge words and phrases, with the association of photographs and revenge being greater in magazines with U.S. origins.

**Research Approach**
In the past two decades, many researchers have used a quantitative approach to systematically and objectively analyze the contents of media (“content analysis”) so that statistically significant relationships could be identified within the contents, as well as between exposures to specific contents and possible effects on consumers of media. This well-established analytical approach (for example, Krippendorff, 1980; Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002; Riffe, 1998; Smith, 2000; Williams, Zabrack, & Joy, 1976) has been used to examine many kinds of media contents, such as aggression (for example, Williams, Zabrack, & Joy, 1976); stereotypes of mental illness (for example, Lawson & Fouts, 2004; Wilson, Nairn, Coverdale, & Panapa, 2000); man-woman relationships (for
example, Klassen, Jasper, & Schwartz, 1993; Rudman & Verdi, 1993); health issues (for example, Kaufman, 1980; Larson, 1991); and body image (for example, Fouts & Burgraff, 1999; 2000; Ogletree, Williams, Raffeld, Mason, & Fricke, 1990). This systematic approach was used in the present study so that objective, statistically significant relationships could be identified and meaningful conclusions could be drawn from the findings.

Method

Magazines
Issues of each magazine (Newsweek, Time Canadian Edition, and Maclean’s) from September 17, 2001, to January 14, 2002, were examined. The week of September 17th contained no references to the September 11th attacks; therefore, the content analysis involved the issues beginning September 24 and ending January 14, 2002. This resulted in 51 issues (3 magazines multiplied by 17 weeks) being examined for revenge words and phrases, photographs, and evil words and phrases. For the analysis, the weeks of December 24th and December 31st were combined, since the magazines varied in their production of a year-end special issue.

Coding Manual and Procedure
A coding manual (available upon request) was developed to systematize the content analysis of the three magazines; it was piloted and refined using magazines and newspapers not included in the study. The manual specified that each article in each issue containing contents referring to September 11th and/or its clear sequelae (for example, related terrorism, security, or economic issues) should be identified; these are referred to as “9/11 articles.” Articles included news reports (containing factual information concerning an event or issue), editorials, and opinion pieces (such as regularly occurring columns and pieces by guest editors). Non-news-related pieces (such as letters to the editor and special advertising sections) and very brief capsules of information (such as “Periscope” in Newsweek and “Notebook” and “Milestones” in Time Canadian Edition) were excluded from the study.

The coding manual detailed the criteria for examining articles identified as relevant, providing descriptions and examples for each variable. The following variables were coded by examining the text of each “9/11 article” (titles were excluded):

- **Revenge words**: Frequency of 18 revenge-related words and phrases (for example, “retaliation,” “revenge,” “payback,” “eye-for-an-eye,” and “getting even”) occurring in the text of the article, with the option of listing other words and phrases not in the list. The list was derived from an examination of the research literature on revenge.

- **Evil words**: Frequency of 16 evil-related words and phrases (for example, “evil,” “devil,” “monster,” and “Satanic”) occurring in the text of the article, with the option of listing other words and phrases not in the list. The list was derived from an examination of the research literature on evil. Only revenge-
and evil-related words and phrases that were sympathetic from a point of view to the United States were coded.

The page(s) on which each 9/11 article appeared were examined for the occurrence of photographs (drawings and photographs of columnists were excluded). If there was more than one photograph, the one closest to the upper left-hand corner of the first page of article was analyzed; that is, only one photograph per 9/11 article was coded. Four kinds of photographic contents were coded:

- **Emotional expression**: Presence or absence of any emotional expression on the faces of people in the photograph (positive, negative, or a combination of positive and negative if there was more than one person present).
- **Graphic destruction**: Presence or absence of destruction—for example, the World Trade Center towers or Pentagon under attack, the rubble, or bombing of the Taliban.
- **Victimizer(s)**: Presence or absence of victimizers perceived to be responsible for terrorism from the U.S. perspective—for example, Bin Laden, Taliban members, Taliban recruiters, or terrorists.
- **American hero(es)**: Presence or absence of individuals who had put themselves in danger or were perceived to have taken action against terrorism—for example, George Bush, Rudy Giuliani, Colin Powell, firefighters, paramedics, or airplane pilots.

**Reliability**

To determine inter-observer reliability for coding the articles, two coders were trained. Training consisted of the coders studying the manual, practising together, and finally receiving practice in independent coding using a large sample of practice ads. Training continued until both agreed on the interpretation of each variable and its coding criteria. Once training was completed, the main coder coded all of the articles in all of the magazines, with the reliability coder independently (and without further consultation) coding 35 articles randomly selected from each magazine (Newsweek, Time Canadian Edition, and Maclean’s). Thus, 105 (15.0%) of the total 698 articles relevant to September 11th were coded for reliability. Inter-observer reliability was calculated by correlating the independent scores for each of the 105 articles; the correlations for the frequencies of revenge ($r = .59, p < .01$) and evil ($r = .56, p < .01$) words and phrases between coders were significant, indicating very good reliability. To determine the inter-observer reliability for the photographic variables (presence or absence of a particular content; that is, dichotomous data), inter-observer agreement for each of the four contents of the photographs was determined by dividing the number of agreements by the number of agreements plus disagreements. The inter-observer agreement for each photographic variable was moderate to high: emotional expressions—78.9%; destruction—72.7%; victimizers—85.7%; and heroes—90.9%.
Results and Discussion

A total of 698 articles from the three magazines contained references to 9/11 and/or its sequelae. They constituted 76.9% of all the articles in all the issues during the four-month period assessed. The percentages of 9/11 articles out of all the articles in each magazine were Newsweek—79.8%; Time, Canadian Edition—82.7%; and Maclean’s—66.7%. These differences were not significant \( F(2, 45) = 2.97, p > .05 \). These results indicate that (a) 9/11 and its aftermath dominated the contents in the major news magazines of both countries for four months, and (b) the news magazines in the two countries did not differ in the relative quantity of their coverage of 9/11.

Revenge

Twelve percent of the 9/11 articles contained a word or phrase referring to revenge. The most common (in descending order) were “retaliation,” “revenge/sweet revenge,” “punishment/punitive,” and “retaliatory strike/hit back/backlash/fight back;” these accounted for 70.0% of all references to revenge. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the number of revenge words per article revealed that the magazines significantly differed in the number of revenge words presented \( F(2, 695) = 6.03, p < .01 \); post-hoc tests indicated that articles in Maclean’s \( (M = .37) \) had significantly more revenge words than either Newsweek \( (M = .21; p < .02) \) or Time Canadian Edition \( (M = .13; p < .01) \), with Newsweek and Time not significantly differing \( (p > .05 \).

This pattern of results indicates that readers in both countries were exposed to the modelling of various aspects of revenge (for example, advocacy of revenge and retaliatory options) in their news magazines. Thus, magazines are a potential source of influence in which people may become familiar with revenge and learn vengeful motives, attitudes, and behaviours associated with victimization. Surprisingly, the results also indicated that revenge was presented more frequently in the Canadian news magazine than either of the magazines with articles written by U.S. based journalists; this indicates that Canadian readers received more revenge modelling than U.S. readers. It is not known whether this difference reflects (a) differences in the magazines’ editorial policies (for example, U.S. journalists being more concerned about inciting private acts of revenge against Muslims by their readers) and/or (b) national differences in how each country views revenge (for example, Canadians being more tolerant of revenge). On the other hand, the greater exposure of revenge in Canada’s major news magazine may have resulted in a greater instigation of vengeful motives, attitudes, and behaviours in Canada, such as prejudice or the defacing of buildings. Research is needed to assess these possibilities.

Justification of revenge

Evil was mentioned in 14.6% of all the 9/11 articles, with 3.9% of the articles specifically associating evil with a justification with revenge. The four most common descriptors (in descending order) were “evil,” “monster,” “Hell,” and “Devil/demon/Satan;” these accounted for 89.0% of all written references to evil. A one-way ANOVA on the number of “evil words” per article revealed significant differ-
ences among the three magazines \(F(2, 695) = 9.34, p < .01\); post-hoc tests indicated that articles in Newsweek \((M = .42)\) had significantly more “evil words” than either Time Canadian Edition \((M = .18; p < .01)\) or Maclean’s \((M = .14; p < .01)\), with the latter two not significantly differing \((p > .05)\). These results indicate that people in both countries read news magazines that justified revenge on the basis of the terrorists being “evil.” Such justifications likely increase the learning and maintenance of vengeful motives, attitudes, and behaviours. The attribution of evil occurred more frequently in the magazine that publishes only a U.S. edition than the magazines with Canadian editions. This may be due to the desire not only to justify retribution, but also to demonize the terrorists (Baumeister, 1997), thus minimizing sympathy for them and instilling hope and confidence (through, for example, the idea that if the enemy is the devil, then God must be on the reader’s side). Thus, American citizens were more exposed to the vicarious emotional-conditioning processes that likely increase readers’ learning and/or maintaining vengeful attitudes and behaviours by, for example, causing readers to think about retaliation with greater emotional involvement due to increased labelling of the terrorists as “evil.” Research is needed to assess this possibility.

Reinforcement of revenge

In total, 90.3% of the 9/11 articles had a photograph on the same page as the article; 8.7% of the 9/11 articles specifically associated an emotional photograph with revenge. The incidence of each kind of photograph (“emotional faces,” “destruction,” “victimizers,” and “heroes”) was determined by examining each 9/11 article for the presence or absence of the content. The incidences were emotional faces (for example, people angry or in pain)—14.3% of all 9/11 articles; destruction associated with the attacks (for example, the World Trade Center towers or the Pentagon—9.7%; victimizers (for example, Bin Laden or Al-Qaeda) —7.6%; and heroes (for example, firemen or President Bush—11.2%.

The association of emotional arousal with the contents of an article increases the likelihood of learning and/or maintaining the ideas embedded within the article; thus, revenge motives, attitudes, and behaviours may have increased in the readers of the articles with photographs that aroused emotions. The percentages of 9/11 articles in each magazine containing each kind of photograph were as follows:

- Emotional photographs: Newsweek—17.2%; Time Canadian Edition—11.2%; and Maclean’s—15.1%;
- Destruction: Newsweek—9.2%; Time Canadian Edition—6.7%; and Maclean’s—14.6%;
- Victimizers: Newsweek—7.9%; Time Canadian Edition—10.5%; and Maclean’s—3.1%; and
- Heroes: Newsweek—15.1%; Time Canadian Edition—11.6%; and Maclean’s—5.7%.

A chi-square analysis was used to compare the three magazines for each kind of photograph (that is, presence or absence of each kind of content). Three of the
four analyses were significant—destruction, heroes, and victimizers ($p < .02$)—indicating that the magazines differed in their percentages of articles containing the three kinds of photographs following 9/11. An examination of *Newsweek* (focused on the U.S. market) versus *Maclean's* (focused on the Canadian market) in the three significant analyses revealed two trends. First, *Newsweek* presented more photographs of heroes and victimizers than *Maclean's*. This may be due to U.S. magazine editors wishing to identify and put a human face on the tragedy, thus emotionally involving the readers with both the survivors and the terrorists. The combination of positive emotions associated with “good” images (survivors) and negative emotions associated with “bad” images (terrorists) is one of the most effective vicarious emotional-conditioning processes known (Bandura, 1969; 1977); therefore, the readers of *Newsweek* may have had vengeful motives, attitudes, and behaviours reinforced more than readers of the other major news magazines.

The second trend indicated that *Maclean's* presented more photographs of destruction than *Newsweek*. This may reflect (a) the magazine’s editorial policy (for example, focusing on the physical aspects of destruction rather than emotional faces so as not to inflame readers), and/or (b) national differences in how Canadians respond to tragedy (for example, by focusing on the destruction and what can be done to alleviate the tragedy). Thus, Canadian readers of *Maclean's* may have been less exposed to the reinforcement of revenge than readers of *Newsweek*.

The overall pattern of results presents an interesting picture. First, almost 77% of all the articles in the three major news magazines in North America involved aspects of 9/11 for the four months following the tragedy. Such coverage was important to inform people of the event’s magnitude, impact, and national and international implications. However, such saturation also likely resulted in the exclusion of many other important events affecting the magazines’ readers; for example, it may have reduced their scrutiny of more local political, educational, and economic issues not involving 9/11. Second, readers in both the U.S. and Canada were exposed to various models of revenge, such as discussion and advocacy of retaliatory military, political, economic options, with Canadian readers of *Maclean's* having the greatest exposure to these models. At the same time, however, *Maclean's* readers were less exposed to two emotional-conditioning processes (photographic reinforcement and justifications of revenge through attribution of evil) than readers of *Newsweek*. This may be due to the former not wishing to exacerbate the emotional impact of the tragedy, thereby not further victimizing its readers. This differential exposure to vicarious emotional conditioning may have contributed, in part, to different levels of effects; for example, the considerable emotionality and trauma associated with the events of 9/11 in the American population (Scurfield, 2002) and increased citizen support of U.S.-government retaliatory options (for example, after 9/11, 86% of American citizens approved of the U.S. military action in Afghanistan; *USA Today*, 2001).

There are several issues for future research, three of which are presented here. First, what were the actual impacts of exposure to revenge and the emotional-conditioning processes in news magazines (for example, increased prejudice and dis-
crimination against innocent Muslims and other ethnic minorities, or support for the “war on terrorism”), and can such exposure be directly linked to reading news magazines? Second, was there a cumulative effect across the several media (such as television, newspapers, and magazines) on the belief in and justification of revenge? Third, what other contexts expose individuals to revenge (for example, family and peer interactions, or entertainment media such as movies and fiction reading) and how might these multiple exposures influence vengeful attitudes and retributive options as a response to a perceived wrong? Media researchers pursuing answers to these questions could make important contributions to our understanding of revenge and how vengefulness may be learned.

References


