

We are all Americans

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taken from the book “Armageddon Supermarket” (Sironi Editore, May 2003)

“Weapons of mass destruction” is the word of the year 2002, at least according to the American Dialect Society, an association which has been studying the English language in North America for more than one century and which yearly chooses the word having more relevance to American society and information¹. The word of the year 2001 was “Nine eleven”, and the passing of the baton was very significant.

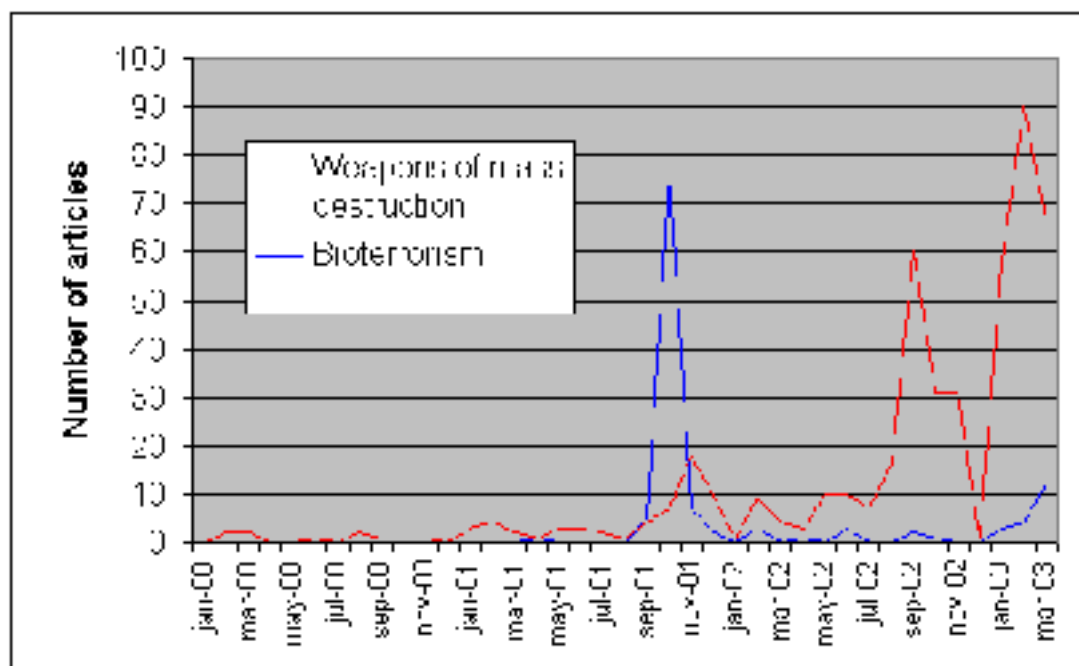
September 11th has actually marked an extraordinary media watershed in the debate on the dangerousness of weapons of mass destruction. The bioterrorist threat, for instance, seems to have gained ground in newspaper pages and in programme schedules — and therefore in people’s houses — together with anthrax letters terrorising America. However, though this lethal powder has remained confined beyond the Atlantic, fear has rapidly spread throughout the world, including Italy.

This is shown by a simple quantity analysis of articles dedicated to weapons of mass destruction and to bioterrorism; this analysis has been carried out on the electronic archives of the *Corriere della Sera*² (see chart). For over a decade, exactly in the period between January 1, 1992 and March 31, 2003, the *Corriere della Sera* dedicated 122 articles to bioterrorism. Among these, 120 were published after September 11th and

¹ “Words of the year”, American Dialect Society, January 6 2003, <http://www.americandialect.org/woty.html>

² The *Corriere della Sera* is the Italian newspaper with the highest nation-wide circulation, that is to say the one selling more copies — about 700 thousand copies on average. Its electronic archives collect all articles published on paper from January 1, 1992 to this day. You can use keywords for your research; we have used “bioterrorism” and “weapons of mass destruction”.

only 2 in the previous nine years. The number of articles peaked in October 2001, when 77 pieces (63 per cent of the total amount) appeared in reference to anthrax letters.



The situation is similar as far as weapons of mass destruction are concerned. Between January 1, 1992 and March 31, 2003, the *Corriere della Sera* published 577 articles on this topic, and 437 of these (more than 75 per cent of the total amount) appeared after September 11, 2001³. The number of articles about weapons of mass destruction first peaked in September 2002, on the occasion of the anniversary of the Twin Tower attacks, of the US debate on the possibility of a war against Iraq and of the UN inspections. It peaked a second time just before military intervention in Iraq.

Within the ambit of the national press, the *Corriere della Sera* is considered an opinion-leading means of information, which functions as a preferential source of information for other media, the public, for politicians, operators and, more generally, for the leading class of the country. By analysing the opinion-leading press, we can therefore have a reasonable and reliable evaluation of the way society gives significance to the most important issues, and we can understand how these perceptions flow in time⁴. In other words, the *Corriere della Sera* reflects the wishes and fears of the society which has produced them.

³ As far as the period between September 11, 2001 and March 31, 2003 is concerned, the electronic archives of the *Corriere della Sera* carry 441 articles relating to “weapons of mass destruction”, but we have not taken account of 4 of them for data analysis, since they were readers’ letters.

⁴ Martin W. Bauer and G. Gaskell, *Qualitative researching with text, image and sounds. A practical handbook*, Sage Publication, London, 2001.

The analysis shows that there is an increase not only in the number of articles about weapons of mass destruction, but also in the fear that this technology can fall into the wrong hands. The chart partly represents news covering a certain period of time, and partly is a thermometer of Italian fear, showing that the temperature goes up also at our latitudes.

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