

DUTCH NORTHERN IRISH COMMITTEE

A POSTSCRIPT TO “THE MEDIA, TERRORISM AND THE FUTURE OF CULTURE”

A study of “Television Today and Tomorrow: wall-to-wall Dallas” by Christopher Dunkley (Penguin Special 1985) and a series of newspaper articles dealing with the controversy surrounding the BBC’s Real Lives programme “At the Edge of the Union” which featured the two men from Londonderry, Martin McGuinness of Provisional Sinn Fein and Gregory Campbell of the Democratic Unionist Party, has led me to further consideration of issues which may be important for the Committee’s future discussions and plans.

1. The major point dealt with in my paper and coincidentally by the Prime Minister of the UK was that the media should deny terrorist organisations “the oxygen of publicity”, an approach which might have some merit as a working philosophy for all branches of the media. I have been struck forcibly by the fact that such an approach has yet to be considered when it may well be the correct one. If it is, it poses many questions regarding the exercise of power by governments, about the attitude of broadcasting organisations such as the BBC, ITV and RTE. It also raises issues relation to the attitude of media producers and, indeed to the attitude of the public and its reaction to programmes or newspaper articles. There may not be ready answers to such questions, for the adoption of such a philosophy would have inevitable consequences for all parties involved.

2. Another important point which must be underlined is that the media are destroying the very culture they inhabit. All my reading to date convinces me that the media judged by their won output are terrorists of culture. Yet this aspect is not discussed either.

3.0 Since the media devote a great deal of attention to terrorism and terrorists there are many issues resulting from that interest which merit consideration in detail.

Do those who make programmes or write articles act out of integrity?

In such circumstances, what is integrity or whose integrity is it which motivates them?

To claim that events can be reported from a neutral stance is to beg the question, what is neutrality?

On the other hand, to take sides may leave one open to the charge of being an accomplice of official propaganda efforts or at best a purveyor of simple emotion and naive patriotism.

In the final analysis, when one is an exponent of a culture one is responsible for it.

3.1 The argument is often made that terrorism should be exposed to public gaze on television so that people can see the horrible things terrorists do and, consequently, be persuaded not to support them. That argument is naive because it fails to realise that some of those who watch television already support one terrorist grouping or another. They may even claim that while they sympathise with the aims and objectives of the terrorists they reject the means. If so, where are the boundaries for the media? To show terrorism on television provides it with the facility to spread its message, not only in the community which may support it, but also, in the one which also opposes it?

Do we know or realise the consequences resulting from that situation?

3.2 The argument is made that it is important for the public to know and understand the nature of terrorism. Equally it can be argued that those who detest terrorism or at least have doubts about its objectives may come to detest and doubt it even more. The converse of that argument is that exposure to terrorism may well lead to a greater understanding of its objectives and the means it employs to achieve them.

The debate about the Real Lives Documentary at least served to demonstrate how difficult, in fact, understanding is for the public. The newspapers devoted more space to the extreme comments of Campbell than to the fact that the words of McGuinness labelled him very clearly as little more than a criminal.

3.3 The media deal with terrorism and terrorists in a number of ways:

Reporting terrorist acts as they occur and afterwards.

Studio discussions on terrorism and its consequences for society.

One of the paradoxes, therefore is that when reporting is done away from the scene of terrorist acts the risks may be that much less in terms of impact on the public but in the actual uselessness of that form of reporting. In truth this raises important questions:

How to deal with the appearance of terrorists on the media as if they were simply providing comment but overlooking the fact that they are lawbreakers?

How can the media cope with the feelings of the relatives and friends of those killed and maimed?

Sadly, the answer to that question would appear to be that the media care little for the feelings of those they simply use and then discard.

The reality is that terrorist organisations seek to manipulate the media and vice versa.

4.0 There are other major questions surrounding the difficulties which arose between the Government and the BBC. Most of them, in fact, are concerned with the status of the media in society, the philosophy of programme making, the freedom and the neutrality of the media. More practically, there are also important questions about the quality of programmes and the values of programme-makers. But these questions do take us away from the real issue relation to the "oxygen of publicity" for terrorism.

5.0 It may be useful now to offer some comments of a general nature. About 500 BC there occurred a mutation of culture in Athens and it is my view that today we are living toward to the end of that change. Instead of the "synthetic" thinking of Greek myth and rhetoric there developed the discussive approach of philosophy to thinking. And consequently today

whatever we may think of the media we cannot ignore the fact of its existence. At times we are glad to have its benefits, at others we realise its inherent dangers. In any event the media provoke yet another relationship with the world we live in and with one another as people and with ourselves.

A new culture inevitable brings about destruction of the old, out of which may come something new in which once again the eternal newness of the Kingdom of God may do its work.

5.1 A new culture always causes a return or resorting to violence. In Ancient Athens Drama fulfilled this function in a substitute way. In our age does the media do this? Could the media, in fact, be part of the process of culture whereby it not only destroys culture but regulates it also? By making violence accessible is the media blocking it out as well from our consciousness? All of this may be simply wishful thinking since we, as yet, do not have a real solution to this problem.

5.2 Yet another factor may be that people are tending to watch less and less television and are reading fewer newspapers and magazines. Does it follow from this circumstance that we pay less attention to the opinions of media-people? Are people, therefore, reverting to small, circumscribed worlds like those of their ancestors, if in fact human beings ever got out of them in any age? What does this mean for our situation today?

5.3 Further consideration of these issues, I believe, would be useful as part of the work of the committee.

Hengelo, 9.12.1985

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