

THE MEDIA AND THE FASCINATION OF CHAOS

1. Introduction

Although it is difficult to measure the influence of the media it is a fact that nearly every household in the West has a television set. In 1989 the average American spent nearly half of his or her conscious life watching television. This article tries to raise questions about the relationship between the media and violence. What does the bringing of images of conflict and violence into the living room do to us?

In itself there is nothing new in our preoccupation with violence and chaos. Much of our knowledge of our past is a collage of battles and massacres. Heroic figures often distinguished themselves by being more successfully violent than other people. What may be new for us today is a preoccupation with violence and chaos which is around us now. When the violence on the screen has echoes in everyday life the difference between the screen and everyday life is crumbling, bringing the violence and chaos of the world about us much closer than it once would have been.

Fascination grows with proximity. Are we ourselves changed in ways we do not recognise simply by becoming more familiar with chaos and violence? We need first to explore this as a reality about ourselves. Although we often blame the media for bringing us violence, how many of us have nonetheless watched such things on the TV with riveted eyes? We may be very much accomplices in whatever it is that the media do. A contagious interest in chaos may grow in us without our recognising it. It is possible that this has already happened with terrorism.

The media familiarises us all with terrorism; we see terrorists absorbing the time and attention of important leaders; we hear of governments negotiating with terrorists; we hear justifications for terrorism; we see special anti-terrorist units whose behaviour is somewhat like that of terrorists themselves, singled out for special praise and adulation (unlike ordinary law enforcers); we get used to precautions against terrorism everywhere. In fact, we adjust our lives in all sorts of ways to the presence of terrorists and we consider it normal that the media should treat terrorism as important news. Or, as we shall try to explain in this article, we bring terrorism within culture.

2. Culture and Restraint upon Desire

We understand that culture shields us from chaotic possibilities amongst us. It not only contributes directly and visibly to social order; it also makes an invisible contribution. Desire is contagious. We all take our desires from other people, who are our models, as we are theirs. We are all mimetic beings.

If it is true that our desires are mimetic, then why don't desires always converge on the same object and lead us into rivalry with each other? Culture does morality, the law, reason or whatever. Second, so long as culture is actually secure we do not have any experience of how we might be, if we were surrounded by others for whom those restraints had been broken down. Sometimes we do come aereo; examples of desires converging in pure rivalry. Two children playing will often fight each other for the same toy, although an identical one lies on the ground beside them. British people who had never heard of the Falkland Islands until Argentina invaded them wanted a war to get them back. A girl becomes almost a goddess for a group of boys after they talk about how beautiful she is; then they all desire her because the others have shown them how desirable she is for them.

Culture is not only about restraint or 'do not's'. It also defines the space we are given in which we can be ourselves without any expectation of rivalry from others' desires - it gives us a place which is our own. If, for example, there were no clear cultural understandings about what our jobs were supposed to entail then we could not do them. Cultures also provide figures of great achievement to be our models, leading our desires in culturally acceptable directions. We can strive to be like them, but they are far enough away (perhaps deceased or legendary) not to become rivals for us. Another essential feature of culture is that we take for granted that others are part of it as we are. When we really take some aspect of culture for granted, we do

not even stop to think about whether others agree with us. We suppose it and anyone seeming not to do so seems simply perverse.

3. The Media, Culture and Difference

Cultural life is only possible because of differences between people. Culture both 'gives' us those differences and through its rules, prohibitions, structure its very 'matter of factness' maintains them. When differences disappear, and everyone becomes the same, then the contagion of rivalry, fascination and violence are likely to increase in society. We have lost our cultural protection.

It is our thesis that the media, particularly television, are acting to destroy differences within culture.

Some examples are the following:

- (i) The place where you are and where others are was always very important with regard to differences but in the media these differences disappear. Now whether the event is on the moon or in your town it is also in your living room.
- (ii) In the past there was always a distance between you and others and it was necessary to make judgements. Now everything is near to you, within your own room; there is no distance at all. When the media presents violence, sex, or great disasters, it becomes clear how important this lack of distance really is.
- (iii) Time has the potential of creating differences. There are things which have happened in the near or distant past and which happen now. In the media both past and present are now. We can be in the midst of events which happened forty, fifty or sixty years' ago or today and thus distance disappears.
- (iv) Big and small are other very important differences. On the television screen the smallest things can become very big and vice versa.
- (v) In television (and film) we are given the images direct, chosen by the director. In print media (and radio) we ourselves have to create the image from the written (or spoken) description. This gives us greater distance and control.
- (vi) We never see the 'whole'. We always only see fragments or snapshots chosen by the media. In a one-minute news clip it is impossible to deal with a complicated reality. Instead we often get a crude vivid image and the 'sound-bite'. We lose the context and the complexity of things and differences again disappear.
- (vii) In the past culture differentiated between public and private, but now the most private and intimate things, such as bereavement, private sorrows, intimate affection or family joy, all become public in the media.
- (viii) It is of paramount importance for culture that there exists a difference between good and evil. As far as the media are concerned events just happen and are brought to the viewer. Whether it is the burial of a terrorist or a policeman, either event is presented with the same care. Because facts are presented as just facts the differences between good and evil are eradicated.
- (ix) Events are 'manufactured' for the media; they would not take place otherwise. The difference between 'real' and 'non-real' events blurs.
- (x) Conflict and confrontation make 'good' television. Therefore, there is pressure to fit the world into this framework. Other parts of reality (perhaps the parts that really sustain life) are driven out as not interesting or new. Since the 1960s the likelihood of violence has become a key factor in news coverage of marches, demonstrations, strikes and riots. Media people flood into Northern Ireland at particularly tense moments when there is the possibility of violence.
- (xi) Previously violence on the screen (particularly in film), however graphic, was muted by a deep ambivalence that shadowed even the most righteous-seeming acts of violence and therefore suppressed the viewers' urge to join in the kicking, for instance in Bullitt, The French Connection, The Searchers, and the movies of Sam Peckinpah. In contrast, screen violence is now often used to invite viewers to enjoy the feel of killing, beating and mutilating. This is most obvious in the slasher films, in which the camera takes the murderer's point of view; it applies throughout the different film genres.
- (xii) The tyranny of the 'new' - what is new and fashionable is what is real significant. The old is to be despised and rejected. So there is an endless pursuit of the 'new' and a loss of memory and

tradition.

- (xiii) The advertising which surrounds much of the media directly promotes desiring; the people to emulate are those who consume. Restraint of desire is a 'nonsense in this television culture. The spread of television through the world promotes a desire for Western affluence and for Western models of desiring.

4. Fascination

The media people are both exposed to the same forces as everyone else and to the pressure to bring the most exciting, desirable or magnetic things closer and closer to us. When these forces are operating it is clear that all of us -in spite of ourselves - become more and more preoccupied with the things on which most attention has already begun to focus. If something preoccupies us there are many ways the preoccupation can show itself; it is much the same if we are strong against or strongly for something. A parent who waxes furiously against modern music is certainly obsessed with it and is encouraging his children to rival with him or her by finding such music divine. We slide into fascination. We become prisoners of what is around us.

The eventual effects of the media on us may be thought of by analogy with magnetism. As an iron fragment is moved closer to a magnet, the force of attraction grows stronger. With a cluster of iron fragments, the magnet's effect on each fragment is magnified by the secondary effect of each on the other. The media brings us closer to magnets. Culture then is like some viscous liquid on whose surface fragments are held by surface tension. The more they move in the direction of a magnet, the stronger the drag of viscosity in the opposite direction. They may be excited but they remain more or less where they were. Then they are affected in some way by all magnets that are brought near, but not decisively by any of them. Nonetheless, some magnets may eventually be brought close enough to draw them from the viscous liquid. The TV brings many magnets very close to us. The magnets 'draw us from whatever structure that surrounds us are fascinating. Fascination having our eye riveted to a something or somebody massively desired or found interesting. An East German Bishop has described one of the processes going on in his country at present as follows: "We are all very fascinated by the Deutschmark: we want to have it. We are fascinated by the German lifestyle and standard of living". We can't get away.

Conflict, violence and chaos provide a powerful fascination. They bring excitement, novelty, risk, the prospect of power, a narrative of 'goodies' and 'baddies', a break from normal reality, identity and significance and the possibility of a new order at the end of it all.

Most of us remain voyeurs - the images, perhaps, providing material for our daydreams and fantasies. Only a vulnerable few will probably go out and actively involve themselves in real violence. And, nevertheless, violence becomes increasingly part of our world, even though it is still, somehow, 'out there'. So violence can be 'played' with. We can have our 'fascination' in safety, but the difference - the 'wall' - between the screen and real life is already crumbling.

5. The Reporting of Terrorism

This may be most acutely seen in relationship between terrorism and the media. Terrorism is propaganda by the violent act. It needs publicity to amplify fear, to provoke a response, and to spread its message. The act requires the 'oxygen' of publicity. The media provides publicity and therefore the terrorist has a deep interest in and need to manipulate the media. The media feed on novelty, conflict, drama and excitement. Violence and terrorism provide all these things. It is not surprising that the media and the terrorists have a strong interest in each other.

There are the well-known cases of TV crews cooperating with rioters to get 'good' pictures - clearly the riot is serving the common interest of rioter and reporter alike. Sometimes the sight of a televised riot has been important in setting in motion sympathetic riots elsewhere. It may be that such cases are very exceptional. Nevertheless, it is clear that the media are fascinated by violence, and by the destruction of structures and differences in society.

It is clear that in the presentation of terrorism on television there can be no simple, neutral, reporting of the 'facts'. The argument has been that the consequences of terrorism and the defenders of terrorism should be exposed for what they are. There are a number of difficulties in this.

First of all, showing what terrorism does spreads its message. It adds to the fear and anger and the possibility of reaction in the community who oppose the terrorist. And among the community which supports the terrorist it gives encouragement. Having apologists for violence on television blurs the difference between upholders of law and order and law breakers who wish to promote disorder. Both appear on television and both become part of our society. You hear from one and then you hear from the other, as if there was equivalence. Moreover, the supporters of violence get encouragement and significance from seeing their spokesmen on the screen. In the context of a TV audience, which consists of both people who oppose and support violence, what does it mean to 'expose' the arguments of the apologist? Who decides who has 'won'? The supporters of violence? The opposers of violence? The ambivalent? The risk for the apologist is almost always worth taking.

Explanations may be accepted for 'mistakes' by supporters. The ambivalent can be won back. It should also be said that the condemnation of and the commentary about violence becomes part of the act itself. It shows that the act is significant and, indeed, adds to the significance.

6. What cannot be Undone

It is vain to imagine that the invention of modern media technology can be undone. And in the age of deregulation and cable TV, of the displacement of cinemas by video-stores, all possibilities of censorship have become more unreal than ever before. There is strong circumstantial evidence that some pathological behaviour is strongly mimetic of media 'heroes' (who was the model for the Hungerford killer?) But perhaps the most frightening aspect of much modern violence is the vast range of models that might be invoked to explain any pathological behaviour. Therefore, almost certainly, no system of externally imposed prohibitions on media content could be devised which would prevent the media from being a strong catalyst in the destruction of culture by fascinations.

Every effort to set oneself up as a Defender of Culture is doomed to failure. To fight against something is to risk becoming fascinated by it. Culture exists so long as we absorb it, becoming part of us, like a framework around us. This framework provides us with the very real possibility not to be interested in or concerned with whatever is beyond it and rivalling against it. Probably the greatest single asset of culture is the sheer weight of indifference to whatever is fighting it. It is quickly corroded when we rival with its opponents to 'defend' it. 'Defending' one part, we will probably destroy it or uproot another part. The puritan opponents of explicit media sexuality are a great asset to pornographers, because they allow them to hide in a much bigger group including far more culturally grounded interests. The hysterical opponents of modern media presentations of Christ; the zealous defenders of the reputation of the police, who equate criticism with a desire to subvert; all achieve much the same.

The other side of this problem is that whenever any media pressure is pushing something onto the air, the rationalisations for doing so are already present with the pressure. Whenever there is a strong convergence of desires, there are already a massive array of rationalisations all of which can feel very convincing: duty to the public to keep them informed; need to keep up with other competitors in the media; intrinsic interest; courage to break with traditional conventions; viewer preferences, etc. etc. It is probably the case that culture breaking directions taken by minority elements in the media cannot be directly impeded by others working in the media.

7. Finding Other Ways

When terrorists murder people they do so with certain expectations about how the media will respond. The father of an ex-student of one of us was murdered by terrorists; and a local paper gave currency to the terrorists 'explanation'. At other times terrorists have been able to publish statements condemning the police/ army for not dismantling one of their bombs after it had become a hazard to school children. The

terrorists' capacity to rival with the law and order and justice systems is certainly enhanced by media coverage, as we have already stated. The big difficulty is that they also gain from the lack of such coverage whenever it can be shown to be censorship. What they could not cope with is a greater degree of indifference (as opposed to opposition) to their professed aims. In this case their murders would be treated as murder and nothing more. Can the media end its fascination with terrorism? An end to fascination would lead to a self-censorship and a self-restraint in the reporting of terrorism. Murder would simply be murder and the endless comment on, speculation about, condemnation of, would stop.

Within the circles of violence and chaos there are patterns that sustain them, such as retaliation and revenge. The people who threaten retaliation and revenge - those who are close to violence - appear to be the persons who are really important in the situation. These clearly are the people who are 'news'.

Unless we are looking we do not see those who are models of trust or forgiveness. They usually do nothing sensational that would attract a news story. Yet trust and the capacity to forgive are very important cultural assets, about which we must keep each other aware lest they be corroded. A first rule for media people in such situations might be this: where ever there is chaos and disorder, it might be worse if it wasn't for lots of anonymous people who I will only occasionally have the chance to identify. I might be able to spread their light a bit further, but I will have to open my eyes to them first and not be fascinated by fear.

The reporting of Gordon Wilson forgiving his daughter's murderers after the bombing is a notable example of what can happen. The whole reporting began to shift as the media came into mimesis with his action. How this shift took place is not known. What is important is that many people followed his lead and a week which had considerable potential for retaliatory violence was redeemed and will be remembered. Even a paramilitary leader was able to recognise and respond to what Gordon Wilson had done. However, when Government, and others, sought to use his action as a stick to beat the terrorist then it became part of anti-terrorist propaganda. The reporting changed and we were back in the usual media coverage of terrorism. Nevertheless, the integrity of Gordon Wilson's action was not lost.

What is important for all of us is that we find ways of keeping our freedom and escaping fascination with conflict and violence. To be cast adrift to follow the whirlpools of fascination is - for those with responsibility in the media especially - no freedom at all. Rather it leads to destruction. We need to go our own way to continue the normal things of life - and to preserve culture,

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