

DUTCH NORTHERN IRELAND IRISH ADVISORY COMMITTEE

THE MEDIA, TERRORISM AND THE FUTURE OF CULTURE

The Scope of the Paper

The overall tone of this paper may appear somewhat passionate as it reflects my concern regarding the responsibility the media bear for the future of culture generally. (I will return to this point later on in the paper).

Worse, it may convey the impression that not only am I rather pessimistic but that I am also sitting in judgment on those who work in the media and even scapegoating them. I hope to correct that impression as I am very sure that these people are locked into vicious circles, just as we all are. The mechanisms of the media, as integral parts of the mechanisms of our culture, are far stronger than any goodwill so long as there is no real understanding of what is happening around. My remarks on the media are fragmentary but they touch on major issues such as the educational consequences of the availability of the media, the impact on family life and the possibilities for learning-processes generally.

The Committee's Interest in the Media

Two of our conferences have been devoted to the media; one for editors of Irish provincial newspapers in 1980 and the other for people working in radio, television and the press in Belfast and Dublin on the theme "Truth – the first casualty" in 1983, because as a committee we felt that, in the Irish situation, the media has a very important role to play. Also, as a result of the report I wrote on meetings with the Royal Ulster Constabulary, I tried to find out about the relationship between terrorism and the Media. A conversation I had with a policeman helped to convince me how much terrorism and the media depend on one another. It is also rather striking for me that some months after I wrote that report on the police and had that conversation, in both of which I indicated my view that the media function as helpers of terrorism, both the United States government and the British prime Minister, Mrs. Thatcher asked the Media not to provide "the oxygen of publicity" for terrorism and terrorist acts.

The Media and Culture

The Media are not only exponents of culture but at the same time are imprisoned in it. They do not bring anything new to culture but, by their very nature, they reinforce certain processes current in it.

1. The whole of culture has always been built on differences and on structures. Cultural life is only possible because of differences. Structures have likewise made it impossible not to be different. Contemporary culture on the other hand strives to do away with all traditional differences and structures. A major question, therefore, is how will culture survive without them as the media in themselves have the capacity to destroy all structures.

2. Culture has always tried to prevent desire which has been regarded as the cause of violence, which, in turn, can destroy culture. A realization that there is validity in this view is developing. For example, Vincent Crapanzano has underlined that

“the full possibility of desire is always terrifying” The New Yorker,
25 March 1985 p52.

Since World War II culture progressively seems to be forgetting this inherited wisdom and appears rather to be encouraging desiring. Professor Helmut Schoeck, the German sociologist and author of “Der Neid” has written with great insight and understanding about what is going on in society today, and is very much puzzled by it. Neid has also worked in the United States and his view of the future is rather bleak for, in a sense, the sole theme of the media appears to be desire. I will come back to these two points.

The Power of the Media

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 and a radio so that as a consequence the Media exert considerable influence. If people working the Media naively believe that they do not exert great influence but would like to do so, this believe would only make matters worse. Inevitably they would try to obtain more influence.

Other aspects underlining the power of the Media are:-

1. The Media constitutes a relatively closed world with its own technology, its own language, its enormous power and its considerable interdependency of people. This world has massive financial resources which are obtained from the very people who are manipulated by the Media. The manipulation is mostly done in good faith or “conscience” because it is justified as “service to the public” or “the public must know”.
2. Although the claim is made time and again that the media only presents facts the reality is that facts do not exist sui generic. Facts only exist within contexts and these are determined by the media. The Media only survive by interpreting so-called facts, by presenting their own messages from their chosen facts. The Media always bring their own thinking, ideologies and preoccupations to the task.
3. The Media are always “on the air”. They act like gods and often feel like gods so that the consequences for their ideologies and so on are far-reaching.
4. Things tend to get worse because the consumers never see the “whole”. They always see fragments or snapshots chosen by the Media. As a consequence, as Enzerisberger notes, reality is destroyed or at best fragmented.
5. It does not help to have recourse to personal opinion, to the possibility of exercising one’s own judgment. On most issues the consumer does not have any views. What is worse, and is in many respects paradoxical, is that the very people who are critical and independently-minded are often those who are most influenced. Those who are active in forming opinions of their own are often deeply involved in what the Media present.

The Media and differences in Culture

Culture only exists because there are differences. In a sense we are all the same but it is only because there exist differences between us that we can live together. What happens then about differences in the media? It is not possible to give a full account of these differences and I think it may not be necessary. Some examples will suffice since in any case all differences are in the end engulfed by desire, the desire to present “something interesting”. Desire is the human possibility which made it absolutely necessary for culture to create differences. The fact that desire engulfs all differences is purely consequential.

1. 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.
2. In the past there was always a distance between you and others and it was necessary to make judgements. Now everything is near you, within your own room, there is no distance at all. When the Media presents violence, sex, or great disasters, it is clear how important this lack of distance really is.
3. Time has the potential of creating differences. There are things happened in the near or distant past and which happen now. Out 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 and thus distance disappears.
4. Big and small are other very important differences. On the television screen the smallest things can become very big and vice versa.
5. In the past culture differentiated between public and private but now the most private and intimate things such as bereavement, private sorrows, coitus or family joy all become public in the Media.
6. It is of paramount importance for culture that there exist a difference between good and evil. As far as the media are concerned events just happen and are simply 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.

In fact this situation reflects an aspect of the movement in the whole of culture. the sole value which remains or, more properly, replaces all old values is desire. It also becomes difficult to know what is good or what is bad. Here too the Media are exponents of culture and are responsible for pushing things forward.

7. Crapanzano in an article on the press in South Africa (The New Yorker, 25 MarJch 1985, No. 89), noted that

“The equation of violence, sex, scandal, corruption and sports (surrounded by advertisements) is striking”.

It is true of Media everywhere that all differences disappear.

The Media and Terrorism

It is very curious how much terrorism and the media resemble one another. They both destroy all differences. Naturally both sectors rationalize what they want or do not want. The resemblance does not change because of these rationalizations.

Both are endangered or threatened by the same possibility – to be ignored and forgotten. Both use every available means to prevent it happening. Indeed both of them share the same goal which is desire and the need for crude violence – but neither of them will ever admit to that. Any recourse to violence requires the setting aside of the culture of a society. This has always been true of terrorism and today it appears that the media are on the brink of the same development.

Certainly the media are fascinated by violence and they seek always to contact that which is outside culture, that which cannot be described but which maybe can be shown on television. Desire being the main means available to the media, sheer violence is the necessary end of the whole enterprise.

There is well-documented evidence of camera crews encouraging rioters to re-enact violence by throwing stones or petrol bombs so that better “pictures” can be captured on film.

An important, related question is how far violence on film or television leads to further violence. John Searle in “The Campus War” (Pelican Books 1972) suggested that television had the following three identifiable effects on student revolts.

“It helps choose the leader of the movement, it dignifies the proceedings and it spreads the phenomena”.

It may be that violence in communities becomes more widespread because everybody witnesses it or vicariously shares in it on television. It is a subject which demands further consideration.

The Future of culture

The future of culture does not depend solely on the mass media but they can help the spread of desire and violence and as a result cause the breakdown of culture. That appears to be true but perhaps there are other possibilities such as the following:

- i) Desire may become pointless or, in any event, not lead to violence when all that is desired becomes available without too much work or effort. Modern mass production techniques undoubtedly have helped to contain violence since everyone has the opportunity of buying the same goods as everyone else. It may be that the production of endless vistas of the desirable eventually brings the satiation of desire.
- (ii) A second possibility is that the advent of naked violence from worldwide sources in the individual’s home through television, and without description or explanation, is so threatening, as Crapanzano suggests, that eventually it will counteract all violence. to be continually in the midst of pure violence may make it impossible to be violent any more. Further study of such a thesis would be very interesting.

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