Violence in Televised News

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Table of Contents

Foreword, Richard Miller 4
Introduction, Henry Ingberg 5

What Violence? What Images? (part one)

The Information That Hurts Us, Jacques Gonnet 8
Invisible Violence and Violence as a Spectacle :
a Crime-inducing Absence of Reality, Jacques Delcuvellerie 13
Images of Violence, Violence of the Image, Guy Haarscher 15
The Bloody Cleaver of The Cold Screen, Pierre-Paul Renders 19

At The Source (part two)

When The Violent Image Is A Piece of Information, Christian Dupont 22
The Courage To Show Violence And To Refuse The Unbearable, Dominique Demoulin 25
When's it on, mister? ,Philippe Jourdain 26
Does competition explain everything?, Benoît Grevisse 28

On The Screen (part three)

A debate with the news directors :
Marc Dehaan, Jean-Pierre Gallet, Stéphane Rosenblatt, Erik Silance 31
Mostar: the testimonies you never saw, Patrick Remacle 38

The Effects (part four)

The effects discussed, Marc Lits 41
Children stressed by violent images : consequences and remedies, Serge Tisseron 45
Children and September the 11th, Anne Merkelbag 49

The Signposts (part five)

Laconic Professional Codes of Ethics, Martine Simonis 52
Image Rights: Which Rights, Which Images?, Stéphane Hoebeke 56
Image Rights Abroad: Four Examples, Stéphane Hoebeke 59
The CSA, a Safety Net, Evelyne Lentzen 61
The Five Questions of Editorial Debate, Stéphane Rosenblatt 64
Mediation, Filter or Fireguard?, Jean-Jacques Jespers 66
Learning to Read The Media, Gabriel Thoveron 68

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Foreword

"A democratic civilization will save itself only if it makes the language of the image into a stimulus for reflection, and not an invitation to hypnosis."

Umberto Eco

Violence in television is at the core of a wide debate. After the initial indictment of fiction, all the other programmes were called to the witness stand: cartoons, talk-shows, reality-TV shows, commercials…

News programmes were not spared. The daily news, investigative reporting, and other programmes were the alleged victims of the downward levelling of standards induced by the necessity to integrate the requirements of increasingly competitive programming policies.

Is there too much violence in the news programmes?
In Latin, *informare* means "to fashion, to form" and, by extension, "to give a shape, a structure, a meaning".

The mission of these programmes is therefore to report on the world, but also to go further and to give it a meaning, to provide the keys to unlock and decrypt our reality, showing its complexity and richness.

Violence is a fact of life. Physical, psychological, economic, social, or environmental violence is an essential part of humanity and its works. Accordingly, it has its place in the news programmes. But it should not be part of a spectacle or just another piece of gossip.

Television news images rarely have significance or meaning in themselves and, no matter what they are concerned with, they need to be replaced within their context and explained. When images or commentaries may prove too explicit for the audience, this marking process is a necessity, the more so as emotion is here an integral part of the viewing experience. This is the reason why the presentation of any kind of footage or statement should not be ambiguous or unclear as to the reason why these items are broadcast at this time and place.

Maybe the criticism stems from the discrepancy between the violent nature of the broadcast information and the lack of a *raison d'être*, a relevance which would justify their presence on the screen. The image and the commentary become obscene when they have no foundation, when the trust between the broadcaster and the audience is broken. The ethical responsibility of the journalist acquires here its full meaning and scope.

Richard Miller
Minister of Fine Arts, Literature and Media
for the French-speaking Community of Belgium

Introduction

I said to him,
"Why is it, Alfonse, that decent, well-meaning and responsible people find themselves intrigued by catastrophe when they see it on television?"
I told him about the recent evening of lava, mud and raging water that the children and I had found so entertaining.
"We wanted more, more."
"It's natural, it's normal," he said, with a reassuring nod. "It happens to everybody."
"Why?"
"Because we're suffering from brain fade. We need an occasional catastrophe to break up the incessant bombardment of information."

Excerpt from *White Noise* ([1])
Don Delillo

On the 31st of March 2001, the French-speaking Community of Belgium was one of the sponsors of the conference on violence in televised information programmes organised by the Institut de Journalisme (IDJ) and the Association des Journalistes Professionnels (AJP). Focusing on physical and moral violence and the regulatory situation, the one-day conference highlighted several aspects of the question, which, although not self-evident, are highly relevant to the debate.

These aspects deserved to be developed. It was also useful to open the discussion to external opinions, as only news professionals took part in the conference. Finally, we wanted to share our reflection with the public. In the 90s, the Community acted mainly in the area of fiction programmes and dealt primarily with Japanese cartoons and American series and movies.A shift has been witnessed recently, and, this time, the news programmes are under scrutiny ([2]). In January 1999, the Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel (CSA - the Belgian media regulatory body) punished a channel for broadcasting in the evening news a sequence containing "gratuitous violence." ([3]) This ruling, first of its type, indicated that, as far as the regulatory body is concerned, news programmes do not enjoy any special privileges in the area of youth protection ([4]).

Nevertheless, it is a sensitive topic, as it affects freedom of information, a fundamental human right, and any state intervention in this matter cannot help but bring about concerns of censorship. The media are a safeguard of democracy, through the information and the tools, which we use to fashion our perceptions and opinions of the world. The popularity of the daily news programmes indicates the importance of their role in our everyday lives.

The ratings remind us as well of the importance of news in the broadcasters' strategy to gain market shares. In a highly competitive environment, the real issue lies in the merchandising of the information and, as far as our current discussion is concerned, in the potential of spectacular pieces of information to attract more viewers. Keith Graves, a Sky TV journalist, comments peremptorily on this last question in his quote about a fabricated news story in Kosovo: "That's the bloody trouble right now. […] All the public wants is atrocity stories." ([5])

This acerbic comment should not disguise the reality of a difficult profession, where questioning, doubt, and reflection are the central concern of its members. Modern technology allows information to be relayed so fast that increasingly often the journalist has to make decisions on his own and without the benefit of the larger perspective. It is most important to know and to understand the production process of sequences, which at the end go on the air. Where do the images come from? What conditions do journalists and cameramen work in? What influence does competitive pressure have on them? … These are the questions we need to answer to improve our knowledge of their activity. Next, we need to consider the integration of the news reports in the editorial line of the channels and the answers that their managers provide to the issue of violence.

There are safeguards: the Community's legislation on the media ([6]), professional and corporate codes of conduct and CSA's activity. However, the concept of violence remains vague and providing a detailed definition would be difficult.

Many studies on the effect of television on the viewers' behaviour have focused on the relation between violence as experienced on the screen and acts of violence. Even if, to the best of our knowledge, none of the studies were conclusive, it should be noted that few of them analysed the impact of violence shown on news programmes. Does the viewer distinguish between "real" and "fictional" violence? What is the influence of the viewing context? How do the younger viewers perceive violence and manage the stress induced by it? Is there a need to introduce youth protection measures for news programmes?

We have asked a number of key figures from all walks of life – media professionals, artists, intellectuals, teachers, administrators – to share with us their opinions and experiences on these questions. Rather than to come up with definite conclusions, the purpose of this work is to stimulate and enrich the debate with contributions from many different authors. It is thus a continuation of our previous initiatives, whose role was to foster the interdisciplinary dialogue and reflection, the exchange of viewpoints, and the comparison of experiences. It is illustrated by our collaboration with the IDJ and the AJP, as well as the presence of independent experts and television channels representatives on the editorial comity of this publication.

Henry Ingberg
General Secretary

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1 Don Delillo, *White Noise*, Picador, London, 2002, pp. 65-66.
2 Notably during the second public hearing of the channels on the evaluation of their compliance with the "Code déontologique relatif à la diffusion d'émissions télévisées comprenant des scènes de violence" (code of conduct on the broadcasting of programmes containing violent scenes) (February 1999) and during the "Le cinéma rend-il méchant?" (Do movies make you bad?) conference, organised with the Brussels International Festival Of Fantasy, Thriller & Science-Fiction Films (March 2001).
3 See decision nr 1/99, January 20, 1999 against RTL-TVI.
4 In June 2002, the French CSA (French media regulatory body) reprimanded France Télévision for broadcasting two sequences, in which some images were considered to be in violation of youth protection principles.
5 Quoted in Mensonges de guerre au Kosovo, Robert Fisk, in L'Empire des médias, Le Monde diplomatique, Manière de voir n ° 63, mai-juin 2002.
6 See in particular art.24 quater of the Decret on the audiovisual media (17 July 1987).

PART ONE

What Violence ?
What images ?

The Information That Hurts Us

Jacques Gonnet,
Professor at the Université de Paris-III -Sorbonne nouvelle
Director of the CLEMI

Why not begin by expressing a feeling of uneasiness? Violence on the television news send us back, whether we want it or not, to painful situations and often traumatizing personal experiences. Later we are able to stand back and reflect coolly upon it. But at the time, we are often submerged by anger or helplessness… Our words express clumsily what these images of suffering bring up in us. We hesitate between embarrassment and revolt. Why talk about this in the first place?

These words that we speak under our breath let us maybe rediscover first our relation to the suffering of others; buried memories, badly controlled fears, self-protective rejections. A few key words: embarrassment, denunciation, refusal, commitment…

This is the reason why this relation to violence in the television news is experienced as a personal hurt. Hurt, as when we learn about a tragedy and are overwhelmed by a feeling of helplessness. Primo Levi comes to mind here. When comparing (in the 60s) our information society with the old Nazi society, where "those who knew, would not speak, those who did not know, would ask, and those who asked, would not receive answers," he declared, that thanks to the globalisation of information, such a planetary drama could not take place in the same conditions. Is this analysis of a belief in the virtue of information still valid today? Primo Levi would then point to the long list of genocides and crimes which had taken place on every continent and declare that a universal conscience could have changed the flow of events by denouncing the slave trade or the genocide of the Native Americans, the Armenians, the Tziganes… It is true that at the time it was possible not to know. Unfortunately, Primo Levi's belief that the impossibility of not knowing engenders at least the absence of complicity and probably brings about action is an illusion.

Still, lucidity does not entail pessimism as to a possible fatality. On the contrary, it demands action, it makes us look directly at all the escape behaviours we invent. But how can we live with the suffering which we see all the time? How to bear the unbearable? Here we come across an extreme dissonance of everyday life when we remember that the human spirit is also defined by what Emmanuel Lévinas calls a "madness" which distinguishes us from the animals: we suffer for the one who suffers. This tension is also one of the bases of our relation to the world.

We ask ourselves an unsettling question: why am I more affected by this suffering person rather than by that one? The answer contains some mystery, but has also roots in our private history. I can feel close to a suffering person, because it is easy for me to identify with her: (she is my age, she has the same background, the same values), but the opposite may be true as well: the other's foreignness affects me because I don't share his or her reference points or defences and I am therefore more able to perceive his or her unacceptable condition.

Sometimes, the monstrosity of an event is such that the victim's defence mechanism induces denial. In such cases, it is common to observe "reroutings", diversions, which allow the internal work of acceptance to take place. For instance, a child who experienced the death of his parents during the war will "forget" the scene, but will develop an attachment to an animal and will protect it pathologically against the external world. The drawings made by traumatised children are ripe with diverted stories, full of animals or people who repair and heal, who weave bridges between the blackness of an unbearable suffering and the lights of the will to live.

But why are we affected, touched? Most of the time, when we actually receive the information, we are in a situation which already makes us receptive and available. We do not expect *a priori* the unbearable to explode on the screen in the middle of our usual environment. The relation of trust is heightened by our familiarity with television as the preferred medium in many households. It is fair to say that if the TV news is my main source of daily information, I will establish a relation of connivance with its discourse. Therefore, a dramatic piece of information will have more weight if its standing is increased by the newscaster who belongs to my private sphere.

In one of his articles, Eliséo Véron describes this startling effect, which links us to the newscaster, an intercessor between the event and the audience, who looks at us straight in the eyes. ([1]) Many theorists have tried to identify and to describe these devices, this imaginary realm that we construct along with the media. One way of approaching it is to unveil the media's hidden functions, which serve to satisfy our desires. Even without reviewing the theories of "reception" of the media, we know that the concept of "audience" generates various and opposing definitions. Elihu Katz expresses this state of affairs in a humorous, albeit severe, way: "One side "proves" that the TV audience is ill-informed, indifferent, anomic, alienated and vulnerable. The other side "proves" that the viewer is attentive, informed, integrated in a community of interpretation, with a critical attitude towards the media, capable of influencing public opinion."

This is the reason why we should stop hiding the complexity of our relation to violent information. "How dreadful"!, exclaims Proust's Madame Verdurin, upon reading in Le Figaro about the sinking of the Lusitania while happily dipping her croissant in her latté: "The expression on her face was rather one of sweet satisfaction."

In the 50s, Jean Stoetzel based his analysis of our confusing relationship with the media on the imaginary of the written press. His approach is still valid for the other media: reading newspapers, watching television programmes, going to the cinema, all these actions affirm our belonging to a community. They are proof of sociability. I belong to a group, I belong to a given moment in the history of the world. The media establish a link between me and the realities of my time. News items, gossip or ads columns are the staple of everyday conversations. By keeping myself informed, I am in contact with my community, I avoid being marginalized, or even excluded. Let us remark here that the media allow today an extreme variety of ways in which we can relate to the world. The press, the television, the Internet allow me to belong in an original way, in harmony with my sensitivity and options.
Information is the basis of a world of entertainment and creation. Most of the time, as was said earlier, I read the newspaper when I rest. On public transport or waiting rooms, reading the newspaper is as much an entertaining activity as the result of my desire to keep myself informed. The publishers meet this expectation by adding serialised novels, travel reports, crosswords… Even the most "serious" newspapers have these sections. Jean Stoetzel also emphasises the psychotherapeutic function of the press. Life by proxy is a particularly strong dimension in this relation. It is the idea of catharsis taking place through liberations of biological and cultural tendencies, which are repressed in social life. The media would take part in bridging the gap between the multiple desires and the ability to satisfy them.

This analysis was continued by Edgar Morin, in particular in his study of the mechanisms of projection and the spectator's identification ([2]).
Do we get rid of our violent tendencies when we see actors on film breaking taboos and laws? I project out of me anything I may not or cannot accomplish. I also identify with characters of my choice. Mostly through haircuts and styles, fashion retains all that these mechanisms provoke by mimetic conduct.

The writer Andreï Makine gives a beautiful example of these behaviours in his novel *Once Upon the River Love* ([3]). Three teenagers identify themselves with their heroes, Jean-Paul Belmondo and Alain Delon, in the USSR of the 70's.

However, Makine goes beyond a simple description of their emotions. As a matter of fact, we witness the whole population undergoing a transformation: “Usually, the audience would break up quickly after the evening showing. They would hurriedly walk through the dark back alleys, eager to go home and get some sleep. This time, everything was different. People were leaving the cinema slowly, like sleepwalkers, with a distant smile on their faces. Flowing to a small piece of wasteland behind the cinema, they hung around for a moment, blinded, deafened. Intoxicated. Their smiles were meeting […] And sometimes only a repressed smile emerged from this overflow of emotions:
“Belmondo” …

We saw the movie seventeen times…”
A collective imaginary is thus created with new myths which belong to the background of our everyday lives. Do these identifications orientate our life without us knowing it?
It is difficult to understand *a priori* why we choose to see violent, painful works. Makine tells us a story of adventures where the spectator finds it pleasurable to identify with the hero. But why do we watch tragedies and violent information?
Since Aristotle, this uneasy pleasure of the spectator has been the object of a heated debate. By participating in the spectacle of a tragedy which displays an action which upsets us, the violence of makes us uneasy and carries us away, we would purify and liberate ourselves of tension, which we transfer to the action and the actors. This tension comes from the mere fact of living. Very early, it gave rise to liberating practices: states of trance, ecstatic and carnal communication with Dionysus, a disquieting divinity, essential to the life of the City, because he represented the unfathomable part of ourselves.

Dionysus means “the elsewhere.” He indicates the Other. He is the symbol of a world which is wild, beyond comprehension, and irrational. This world is also brutal: it is in opposition, for instance, with the rules of the City, which ritualises cooked meat (one part consecrated to the gods, one part reserved for the men). In Dionysian practices, the animal is eaten raw, after a violent hunt at the conclusion of which the victim is shred to pieces. With Dionysus, the state of primitive brutality is reinstated and glorified: man is god and beast at the same time.

Therefore, the concept of “catharsis”, as suggested by Aristotle, is not easy to define. It has quite a few dark areas. Most of the time, catharsis is said to have two functions. Purgation and purification. Purgation makes it easier to adapt to the environment, to the reality of living in a community. Purification points to a journey, to an interrogation about the meaning of life, featuring for instance, rites, meditative silences, prayers, singing… In the case of the suffering of others, we could interpret it as an attempt to assume control over the emotions. Theatre becomes then an excuse for an attempt at self-knowledge, but with safeguards and no danger: I know that what I see is not real.

But how can we find reference points in our civilisation, defined by its ubiquity, and in a world which potentially can be present anytime, anywhere in our lives? How can we define the role of the media? The dazzling development of the Internet reinforces even more this new type of relation with the other person, a person which I did not know yesterday, but whose proximity is today’s discovery.

In the *Gutenberg Galaxy*, Marshall MacLuhan describes how the telephone, the radio, the television are modifying our relation to the world and suggested the concept of the global village. Ubiquity and immediacy: the media project us in a new imaginary zone, where I can potentially learn everything of the world. Nothing here is foreign to me; therefore I am not spared anything. The spectacle of the world explodes suddenly, catching me unprepared.

We live in a permanent proximity to the unknown, to the distant through television and the radio. In a strange sensation of reality, I am everywhere in a world which comes to me. Let us leave aside a certain euphoria and, sometimes, a feeling of power. What matters is elsewhere: my relation to the story is identical, whether the event is taking place in my neighbourhood or on the other side of the planet.

I am not present, but I experience the show in the mode of ubiquity's magic. Strangely, my ability to intervene is not really that different either. Barring exceptional circumstances, I will never go and check the facts of the news report about an event in the town located 10 miles from mine.

I will be *a priori* convinced by what I am shown; being constantly critical and alert requires a genuine effort. The media mobilise our senses, which initially push us to believe.

This impression of reality is reinforced the strange feeling of being present and taking part in the action. Immediacy, following life unfolding with me and which prevents me from turning the television off, which suggests that I continue the experience, just like in my everyday life. This contact with a world in arm's reach is lived, practiced for around three hours every day by the average Western viewer.
Today, we learn of the world mostly through the media.

In the translations of reality they offer, suffering figures have an obsessing place. Therefore, the strong reactions of rejection, sometimes compassion, often indifference. From time to time, a barely whispered question touches gently the conscience: what can I do?
This question requires that we identify the words of this feeling of helplessness always present in the confrontation with the violence of the news stories. The simplicity of these words (guilt, urgency, compassion…) sends us back to a question which is part of the history of humanity. Each great philosophy has given specific answers, propositions of action and commitment.

But the knowledge that we were acquiring yesterday used to be constructed differently. The nature of the relation to information was different.
First, the pace is new. Nowadays, one image covers another, a genocide follows up upon a massacre or comes up between a commercial break and a world record.
Then, the link which allowed the construction of meaning by the dialogue (within a community or a family) is now mainly maintained by the media. It makes no difference whether we regret or welcome it. But getting the measure of this upheaval avoids looking gullibly at things and thinking that knowing the world is enough to transform it.

However, learning the world through the media is not a new thing. Jorge Luis Borges declared that he had the feeling that he had never left his father's library. In one of his short stories, the narrator imagines that his library, as large as the Universe, is itself part of another circle of libraries which evoke an eternity of books. Here though the book has the function of a medium and the temptation of a life among books is a constant theme in literature. In *Words*, Sartre, comparing the discovery of reality with the pages in the Encyclopédie Larousse on flora and fauna, observed: "In the Jardin d'Acclimatation, the monkeys were less monkey, in the Luxembourg garden, men were less human."

There is a particular media pleasure, the pleasure of mystifying the senses, the correspondences, the imaginary. These joys are precious, they are part of our culture.
But these magical initiations of the world disappear suddenly before a reality, before a world, which through a play of mirrors, is simultaneously the same and different. The same, because the media stage, in the information about the world, representations of our representations; different, because I leave the placid role of the spectator to tumble into a relation to the other whom I discover in his suffering. Now, what I learn about the world sends me back to myself, but it is a self which is constantly projected into urgency. No preparation before receiving the images and sounds of the unspeakable, the vertigo of asphyxia or of indifference.

The first necessity is to learn about the media to in order to prevent being their toy, to learn the images and the sounds just like we learn to read and write in order to once again make conscience available, so that the rush of urgency is not a whirlwind in an unstructured world.

Man today has the measure of the two-sided mirror of his universe of excessive information: the marvellous illusion and the loneliness of being. We are hurt by information, because we discover the old lie, transmitted since the dawn of civilisation: being informed allegedly changes life. Certainly, a piece of practical information matches perfectly this vision: from weather forecasts to the news of my neighbourhood, I have a vital need to be informed. But I expect this piece of information, I transform it into action.

However, through capillarity, information about the world appears with the same status. But I don't do anything with it. I don't know what to do with it. The helplessness comes from this lack of understanding that we don't dare speak aloud: why doesn't the knowledge of the massacres in Rwanda not stop the massacres in Rwanda?

This helplessness, this diffuse vertigo which seeps into me, shouldn't it be understood as the sign of my belonging to the human community?
Shouldn't it be recognised, in its barely controlled trembling, as the proof of what Lévinas describes as a sign of human madness, suffering for the one who suffers, a madness the animals do not know?

By the same author:
Les médias et l'indifférence, PUF, 1999

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1 Eliséo Véron, *Il est là, je le vois, il me parle*, revue Communications n°38, Le Seuil, 1983, pp. 98-120.
2 Edgar Morin, *L'esprit du Temps*.
3 Andreï Makine, *Once Upon the River Love*, Penguin, 1999.

Invisible Violence and Violence as a Spectacle : A Crime-inducing Absence of Reality

Jacques Delcuvellerie,
Director, author of Rwanda 94

"In the genuinely inverted world, the truth is a moment of the lie."
The Society of the Spectacle
Guy Debord.

In "Rwanda 94", two entities orchestrate the progress of the spectacle: the Choir of the Dead and the television. The victims of the genocide are at the centre of things, as ghosts of the dead or as survivors, those who should have died. The television is both the accused and the investigator. Several times in the play, its capacity to provide an account of reality is severely questioned. In an obsessive refrain in Kinyarwanda and in French, the Choir of the Dead repeats:

"These devices which spread information
They infect the hearts and soil the minds."

Later, another character, Jacob, says:

"How to express
the infinite sizes of truth, both huge
and tiny
and the infinite complexity of causes and effects in a place belonging to the media where the word is measured
where formulas are better than reasoning?
(…)
How could noise become consistent analysis?
How could the temple of the spectacle make do with the austerity of truth?"

This is where the question of the relevance of "violent" images needs to be examined. This relevance or admissibility has nothing to do with the images themselves, but their necessity is based on, or even imposed by, the analysis which requires them. The value of the analysis determines their nature: information or spectacle.
One can find on the Internet sites that are exclusively devoted to showing terrible images: mutilated corpses, decaying carcasses, etc. Whatever one's opinion on the nature of pleasure/repulsion they provoke, they are part of a spectacle. The difference between these sites and the newspapers or television shows, which, under the pretence of investigation or debate, play upon the same attraction, is small indeed. Do images of the same type, inserted into a news programme with a minimal informative content, bring it down to the level of the freak show?
In "Rwanda 94 ", when the viewer eventually sees images of the genocide, five hours have already elapsed since the beginning of the play. He has already heard the long story of a survivor, listened to chants, questions, contradictory analyses, and an hour-long conference; he has watched a television broadcast, seen visions evoking the Church, the UN, France, etc. One could horribly say that, at this moment, he "deserves" these images. They come to remind the spectator, brutally, what the genocide really is. The time devoted to the reconstruction and the testing of the context, the focus on the event, the testimony of the survivors and the words of the actors in the play, all this is the antithesis of the language of the television. In the play, the images of the horror are shown in absolute silence.

In addition, there is no music or comments to be heard: they are part of a scene between a news editor and a journalist who argue whether these images should be broadcast and, if so, under what conditions.
No image is unacceptable in itself; television takes away its reality and meaning and makes it a part (sometimes unintentionally) of its permanent spectacle. For, if we look closely enough, television uses violence only so that it can dematerialise it. It conceals, silences, masks real violence. Fictional (and overabundant) violence is the television's tool in eliminating the reality of death. Contrary to popular belief, television shows hardly anything of the violence in our world. An article on Rwanda in the Monde diplomatique had the following title: "A Genocide Without Images"… In other words: non-existent. Hundreds of millions of human beings live in infra-animal conditions, tens of thousands are imprisoned, exploited, tortured, abused, fall victim to atrocious diseases that could be treated with some drinkable water or common antibiotics. What about this reality on our screens? And when it is "mentioned," which discourse is it part of? The spectacle of charitable enterprises always obliterates the search for causes. What value system, what "deontology" dictates that the evening news may under no circumstances start with announcing that 40 000 children have died today, because of under-development and the laws of unfair trade? Every day, the (objective?) decision that other pieces of information are more important is taken. What are its foundations, how is it transmitted and what does it hide? What would happen if the television showed the real violence of the world and why is it not able to do so? The wars (Iraq, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan) are less real on the screen than the politically correct fictions based on them. Somewhere between the violence, always impossible to understand, of the events in other places, in Palestine as well as in the suburbs, and of which the viewer hears only the echoes, and the demagogic and reality-destroying violence of fictional works, we may witness the arising of conditions favourable to the production of citizens who are ready to accept the unacceptable.
There are not too many, but too few specific images of violence on television. Specific, meaning presented in a time and with a commentary which rescues them from the spectacle. My masters used to say: the problem is not in showing true things, but trying to show – and therefore to discover – what things are really like.

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Images of Violence, Violence of the Image

Guy Haarscher
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It is one of the recurring questions of our times: do the media sustain and nourish violence, especially among the young? There are different types of media: teenagers are eager consumers of television, video games, and the Internet. They rarely read the newspapers. It is commonplace to say that the written forms of expression are in decline to the benefit of images. Of course, there are also different types of image. Peaceful or varied images are different from brutal and explicit images of violence. Do the latter, short listed as the cause, by mimetism, of some episodes of real violence, have the effect attributed to them by the complacency of common sense, which can often deceive and conceal the laziness of intuitions leading to hasty generalisations? As we shall see in Marc Lits's article, there is no agreement on this point. Recently in the news there was a series of murders committed by very young people, who had copied the modus operandi from a movie in which the murderers wore masks. More generally, it is alleged that violent images, omnipresent in the media, create the conditions for their being acting out. But other theories have it that, on the contrary, on-screen violence is a sort of catharsis ("purgation"), and that it allows for emotions, resentments to be discharged, thus reducing the potential for violence. In other words, what would happen without the images? This line of reasoning is similar to the one used in relation to pornography: explicit sexual images allow for some satisfaction of the drives and reduce therefore the risk of acts of sexual violence. However, these images are not reserved anymore to adults reading X-rated magazines or going to specialized movie theatres. The Nouvel Observateur published in summer 2002 a study of the impact of pornographic images on very young children at a time when these images had become very widely available (on television, on video and on the Internet).

Whatever comes out of this controversy, we can also study not only images of explicit violence, but also more generally the influence of the image (whatever its content or message) as such on the potential violence that we all carry in us. In order to understand the problem, it may be useful to start at the other end: what allows us to overcome, to civilise our internal violence, to delay its urgency, or even eliminate it in the long run? Starting in childhood, any frustration generates a risk of violence: when we do not get what we want, we are strongly tempted to use violence whenever it is possible. Violence is the great tempter. If I have the power to get what I want by "forcing" the other or the others, in short, without their agreement, I will have to be very virtuous to avoid using this power. On the other hand, violence will not be used, at least if we are able to think clearly, when the balance of power is not in our favour. But what is the value of a non-violent behaviour, which in the end is the product of powerlessness? It is not an attitude based on principles, as a change in the balance of power would show clearly. Thus in *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes gives a positive value to fear of violent death, which creates the desire for peace. But peace, because we are afraid of losing the war, is a very fragile thing.

In order for the negation of violence to become durable and affirm itself in the middle of the thousand frustrations of everyday life, we must work on it internally, which is neither natural nor easy to accomplish. People who are ready to use violence when a conflict or a dispute arise (I do not talk here about other forms of violence: pure or gratuitous violence) do use it, most of the time, because they are convinced (or have convinced themselves) that they are completely in the right, and that this right is being called into question. And this indignation, this feeling of falling prey to terrible injustice, this self-victimisation, make them almost insane and makes them lose the plot, i.e. they tear down the fragile dams built in us by civilisation to domesticate the instinct. Someone who believes themselves to be absolutely in the right may give in to violence with a sort of good conscience which gives backing to all of his or her current and future excesses. Now, bad conscience is one of the main ingredients of not acting out violence. There is a complex alchemy between the adrenaline rush and the conviction that we are right to get angry.

In some cases, the injustice is s terrible, the Other is so horribly wrong, the Evil is so external, that self-defence is nearly magically invoked. How can we expect the parents of the victim of the most heinous crime to remain in the presence of the perpetrator without at least feeling tempted to use violence? Their right (and therefore their pain) seems to them so undeniable that the mere survival of the criminal appears to be unbearably arrogant and insulting. The fact is that most of the time the faults and wrongs are everywhere and we are inclined to show some modesty or tolerance when we realize than we need to take care of ourselves as well. However, this realization does not occur automatically. We should not think naively that there is symmetry between the recognition of other's faults and the acceptance of our own. The child has been described by Piaget as fundamentally egocentric: it begins by accusing the world, the Other, of anything that happens to it. It manages to decentre itself, i.e. see itself in a critical way, only by a fragile maturation process. At that moment, the adult (actual or future) will be equipped with the first virtue of any discussion: fairness. First, it is discussion that replaces violence. If it fails, only the legitimate violence of the State and of its justice will be able to resolve the problem.

This self-distancing process, this ability to put ourselves in the Other's place and to judge ourselves with exactly the same criteria that we apply, assumes the capacity to argue reasonably. It is an illusion to believe that this capacity is the most common quality on earth. Human relations are generally affected by small (or big) paranoias, be it at the level of individuals or at the level of groups (nations, ethnic groups, religious communities, etc.). Ethnic cleansing processes are linked, in the minds of their authors, to this type of perversion of mentalities: everyone sees the straw in the eye of the Other (foreigner, opponent), but never the log in their own. This is how concurring and perfectly incompatible stories are made about the same facts. As an example, we can mention the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: both sides have constructed a narrative featuring exclusively the often-exaggerated misdeeds and base acts of the other side. If we only look at recent events, the Israelis talk about the number of innocent victims of the suicide bombings that bathe in blood their streets, whereas the Palestinians consider only the bombardment of civilians, the everyday humiliations of the occupation (as a matter of fact, we should be talking of a re-occupation), etc. It is only if, once the passions have cooled down, each side is capable of "sweeping their own doorstep", that it will be possible to construct a common history and memory that would form the base of a mutual acceptance of responsibilities. I do not mean to say that the narrative will be the object of a consensus: there will be, like in all discussions, disagreements, different interpretations of the same facts, but all this will be debated. One can even hope that the fault lines will not cross between the communities, but through each of them, which would be part of the normal democratic confrontation of different conceptions of the common good.

However, assuming the Other's point of view ("decentre" oneself) implies a capacity to argue much less widespread than is generally thought. This means, in fact, a commitment to submit oneself to the strength of the best argument, whatever the identity of the person who speaks it. The problem is that argumentation, in its abstraction, belongs to texts, to chains of reasoning. It supposes that the person we are arguing with is able to listen, to read and to think. And here lies the main problem: the image, since Plato, has to be domesticated by the discourse. If it is subordinated to the latter, it allows the person presenting an argument to give it a specific content for a pedagogical purpose by providing an example. However, if the image acquires an autonomy, if it is leaves the framework of the discursive activity, what will happen? The discussion becomes impossible (again). We know that the image, because of its specific and singular character, provokes an "effect of reality": the people who speak with Socrates are often prisoners of such an illusion and make a confusion between the example and the essence, which is the abstract definition of the concept under consideration.

To illustrate this point, let us go back to Plato's famous Allegory of the Cave in Book VII in the *Republic*. Prisoners in chains look at the back wall of a cave which is illuminated by a fire burning outside. Men walk by and events take place between the light source and the entrance to the cave.

The prisoners believe that the shadows projected on the wall by these events are reality itself: since they have never looked back, and are not able to leave the cave, they do not know that they are looking at shadows, reflections – images – and not at true reality, which is outside, out of their field of perception. One day, they are freed by the philosopher and they walk out of the cave. He shows them the real world, which is infinitely richer (in colours, sounds, smells, movements, etc.) than the shadows of the cave. New horizons seem to open up for them: they left the restricted world of the appearance (the "shadow show" of the cave). Why "restricted"? Because the shadows account for only a part (which in fact is very abstract) of the reality in its complexity. So, what happens next? Do the prisoners thank profusely their liberator for the possibilities of happiness he gave them? On the contrary. They want to go back in the cave. The external world dazzles them, it is too rich, too complex and, on top of that, they are not spectators anymore: they have to act, with all the responsibilities it implies.

Who cannot fail to see the relation between Plato's Allegory of the Cave and our media system, based on entertainment (in the ordinary meaning as well as in the meaning of Pascal)? Why do the former prisoners prefer the cave to reality? Because, on the one hand, the images in the cave are simpler, poorer, more reassuring: it is, *mutatis mutandis*, the pleasure that we get from reading simplistic superhero cartoons. On the other hand, in the cave, we are only spectators of the events: the world unfolds in front of us with its tragedies which we do not take part in, which we contemplate from the outside in a simplified form. In the real world, we constantly have to weigh the alternatives, make choices, argue and think ("argue" with oneself). It is a complex universe where nothing is totally clear and where we can never be certain that we made the right choice: an anxiety-inducing world, where, as Sartre used to say, "we have been given no promises." In the imaginary world, everything is simplified, there is Good and Evil, the guilty and the innocent, a clear division between what is fair and what is not. The image takes away responsibility, at least when it is not in a subordinated position assigned to it by the discourse and the thought. The image is immediate, there is no need for words to make it appear, it gives itself to us, in a nearly hallucinatory manner. It is a drug which inhibits lucidity.

Two things strike me when I try to remember my childhood, at the same time not so far away and light-years away from the time of the Image. First the old dusty books written by countess de Ségur, in which an image (often an engraving) would appear every twenty pages to illustrate an important passage of the text. I hated these images, not because they were ugly (their quality was undeniable), but because they used to destroy the internal image of the characters that I had gradually created while I was reading. Suddenly, I would be confronted with the "effect of reality": Sophie or François the Hunchback looked like that, whereas I had made my own representation of them as I was reading about them in the story. The words, the narrative, the arguments had primacy; the image depended on them and was produced by them in me. Today, though, at least in some cases, the text does not come before the image: there is no internal image that is freely and personally constructed; the image is first, everywhere and nowhere, omnipresent. The confrontation between the image-from-text and the given image, which would disappoint me and would push me to prefer mine (therefore the book), has progressively disappeared and the image has taken the power, so to speak.

Another element highlights the distance between the two periods People would be bored quite often then: when the television was becoming popular, it would be located in the living room and was controlled by the parents. Children in their rooms had to do something in order to avoid the anxiety of nothingness (of idleness). At the time, there were certainly many ways to entertain oneself, i.e. to forget oneself, to escape into an activity the only purpose of which was to lose time. But the reign of the Image had not yet begun. Today, one needs only to switch on the television, put a videocassette or a DVD in the appropriate device, log on the Internet or (soon) the mobile phone data services and a stream of images comes rushing to fill the void and make the risk of boredom disappear (for a time at least). However, according to Heidegger, boredom is the veil of Being: it makes us break up the flow of everyday agitation and come back to ourselves.

The domination of the Image means not only a return to the cave and the defeat of philosophy (discourse of the reflection, of the words), but also the end of boredom. Today we have images that create an effect of reality and distract us from our existence. When we talk of entertainment, we should use both meanings of the term: first, as Pascal would define it, (I entertain myself when I escape the possibility of returning to myself, my difficult choices, my responsibility), then the common meaning (I entertain myself when I watch Channel 4 or Sky when I come home after a day of wearying and meaningless work). This second meaning is quite respectable: it is understandable that we may need sometimes to get our minds off our problems, the day at the office, the anxiety of falling ill and getting old, or the death of our loved ones. But if the escape becomes too organised, as it is by the enormous entertainment system of the media universe, (which is often our only point of access to a reality which is external to our restricted field of direct perception), then we will never find ourselves and a general lack of responsibility will take over.

We have seen above that only in a return to oneself is there the possibility to decentre oneself, which is in turn the necessary condition of fairness in a discussion (I see myself – from a sort of "exterior" – as I am close enough to it, and I can therefore apply to myself the same criteria of judgement as to the others). Could we then suggest that a weakening of the discursive activity means an erosion of the dams that rationality could have built around the instinct? If we believe that violence is always imminent in us, could the reign of the image destroy the antidote to violence, i.e. the ability to follow the best argument and to avoid a unilateral vision of the world, where the Evil is outside of us and justifies all our actions, because they undergo a special transformation thanks to our status as victims? There is a definite need to study, not the (many) images of violence, but the violence induced by the (soon to be) nearly absolute reign of the Image in our minds.

The Bloody Cleaver of The Cold Screen

Pierre-Paul Renders,
Director of *Thomas est amoureux*

Just like everyone else, I am shocked by the violence of some of the explicit images shown on the television news. However, if I think about it, the worst violence is that, most of the time, the images of harsh realities seen on screen do not affect me much or even not at all. When I was directing *Thomas est amoureux*, I was led to interrogate myself on the nature of the link that is created across the screens: this illusion of contact and this confusion between the concept of communication (in the meaning of simple exchange of information) and the concept of relationship. Writing among authors who are so knowledgeable on the topic of violence, I would like to present just a few remarks – maybe irrelevant, but sincere – which are inspired by my attitude towards the cold medium of the television screen and the type of violence that it engenders.

Two out of five: failed

The source of my reflection is the place that our society gives to our senses. Without being a sociologist, an ethnologist or a psychologist, and basing myself only on my intuition and my experience, I have the feeling that I am living in a world which builds every social relation on sight and on hearing and relegates thus touch, smell and taste to the sphere of intimacy, or even makes them taboo: socially, physical contacts are reduced and strictly coded, the critical distances are very large, body odours are repressed and concealed… On the other hand, I am told that in the most perfect relation between two human beings, love (between partners, between parents and children, between friends…), the things that pass through touch, smell and even taste are more important than the things that pass through hearing and especially sight – which is the least important of our senses in this respect.

Here appears my first concern about the future of a society which, along time ago, decided – maybe unconsciously and unintentionally, but without recourse – to base all social relations on the two senses which are the least appropriate to support a true relation, an authentic communication. Is this violence the necessary price to pay for progress: the sacrifice of an important part of our humanity? If we burn the bridges to the most instinctive, animal, organic part of ourselves, should we really be surprised by the loss of the feeling of belonging to the same species and by the extinction of the natural solidarity which it entails?

An illusion of contact

What justifies this amputation? An attempt to objectify reality? Sight and hearing are the two coldest senses and are therefore the most appropriate to objectify reality. This is how an illusionary search for objective truth is maintained, to the detriment of affective, emotional truth.

In this respect, this heavy tendency, at work for decades, if not centuries, has been multiplied tenfold by the emergence of the audiovisual media. For suddenly, as the term indicates, the three other senses were definitely banished. People (myself included) who create works of fiction or creative documentaries know how much work is required to provoke true emotions in the audience while working only with images and sounds. In contrast, images broadcast during the news on television are often served brutally, in order to inform us as objectively as possible, which is undoubtedly a praiseworthy objective.

Looking at the news presenter, we live in the illusion of contact, of a real and total communication ("How could it be more total than through image and sound?"), of a true relationship ("The journalist is a guest in my home"), while an essential element is missing: real presence, all the "flow" made up with indescribable but fundamental elements, which takes place when there is a physical presence. As talented as he or she may be, the journalist behind the screen does not give off the same things that a live storyteller, a member of my family telling me a story or an actor on a theatre scene or in a movie would give off. ([1])

Reality without its soul

Through this allegedly objective information, reality arrives to me amputated. First, the context, the explanations, which are necessary to understand properly what is being shown, are missing. This state of affairs is frequently denounced, but rarely is anything done about it. During the television news, we are hit by short clips with little informative value (as they were shot after the event) and which are merely the support of a commentary that has generally only a vague relevance to the images. In the case of investigative reports, we are forced to listen to a voiceover which explains the images, their meaning and also indicates what should be thought about them, instead of letting us understand and feel on our own. In both cases, our freedom and intelligence are violated.
As another consequence, reality arrives to us without the essential part of its emotional charge, of its soul. The news reporters using cameras mention the surprising protection given to them by the eye of the camera on the very terrain of horror: seen through the lens, the suffering becomes immediately easier to watch. The most unbearable part of reality does not cross this filter.([2])

TV lullaby

This is why I remain indifferent to what I am shown. Only particularly violent or moving images can touch me sometimes. And some people take umbrage at it, as if the television was failing in its contractual mission as a hypnotic lullaby. In this respect, I have noticed from my own experience that censorship strikes more eagerly against violence (or sex) when the images in question stimulate reflection and questioning than when they are a mere commercial ingredient, gratuitous and eye-catching. Strange, isn't it?
As a director, I would not like to give the impression that I am cutting the branch on which I am sitting. Just like Aesop's language, the audiovisual media are the best and the worst of things. They have in them the means to fight their own shortcomings and perversions. I am just trying to remain vigilant. Looking at the screen, I could become capable of watching the suffering of others without suffering myself, losing thus what, according to Lévinas, distinguishes the man from the animal. ([3])

1 On this point, the difference with other information media (newspapers and radio) is not very big, but the latter benefit from a small advantage which gives some space to affectivity: space for imagination. When everything is said and shown, imagination dozes off, as does empathy.
2 An image which is out-of-focus, trembling, badly centred will give a stronger feeling of reality and will fascinate better the viewer. As soon as the viewer remembers the lens, it becomes a subject and the filter does work as efficiently. A human being (myself) appears behind the camera.
3 Quoted above by Jacques Gonnet.

PART TWO

At The Source

When The Violent Image Is A Piece of Information…

Christian Dupont,
News reporter, RTBF (Belgian public television)

Friday, March the 6th 1987. It is just after 8 PM. The telexes are sputtering: a ferry has sunk off Zeebrugge. The Journal Télévisé (JT – the evening news programme of the RTBF) is sending two crews to cover the event. I am part of one of them. At the time, I had been on the JT for nearly three years. I know the philosophy: a certain restraint, no voyeurism.

When we get there, we are kept away from the quays where the helicopters carrying the wounded are landing. I ask my cameraman to film in medium shot the unconscious people, which the rescue teams are trying to resuscitate. However, we need images. So, with a few others, we manage to get on a small boat to reach the location of the catastrophe. A ferry on its side, floodlights piercing the night, helicopters over our heads, victims winched up from the water, a landscape of apocalypse. A few hours later, the first corpses are brought into port, lined up on the decks of the rescue boats.

We showed everything, including the corpses, without emphasis, without close-ups, with decency. Unlike others (such as a particular private production company), we did not try to bribe the rescuers in order to access the ferry and shoot the catastrophe at close range. It did not even cross our minds to do that.

If we broadcast images of deaths and tragedies, it was not because of an appetite for the macabre, but because these images seemed necessary for the understanding of a shipwreck in which 189 people died. Because my short experience had already convinced me that an image, particularly a strong one, can make things concrete, has an effect of reality that justifies in a way televised information.
I saw the proof of it in a news story on famine in Ethiopia, broadcast by the RTBF on January the 6th 1985. Over 12 minutes without voiceover, showing people, especially children, dying in front of the cameras, as well as interviews with humanitarian workers. The shock and the start of a surge of solidarity. The papers had already warned first about the threat and then the reality of famine. However, it took a news story on the evening news for public opinion to realize. Already then, some people had pointed out the purely factual character of the news story, the absence of any explanation of the origins responsibilities. But the result is undeniable and lives have been saved.

Thus, during the second half of the 80s, everything was in place: violence and images of it (other equally violent scenes had been broadcast during the “televised” wars in Vietnam, Biafra, Congo…), ethics, at least in the public television (and some who obviously don’t put up with it anymore), and already a critique of television and of its ability to inform. All this exists today, but the context has changed.

More conflicts

First, a word on the production of images used during the news. Most of the images that are related to national or regional events are directly produced by the crews of the news programme. As far as the news programmes of the size of the JT of the RTBF are concerned, images from abroad are still mainly provided by international news agencies (Reuters, WTN, APTN …) and foreign television channels (public or private). Broadcast through satellites, they are recorded in the studio of the news programme. Nine times a day, agencies and channels send us an average of half an hour of images, but when something happens, images can be sent nearly continuously.

In this daily stream, there are more images of violence than in the past. There are several reasons for that: first, because the end of the Cold War, far from making the planet a peaceful place, has opened the way to a series of crises, periods of insecurity and conflicts, in which, in one way or the other, Western countries, and especially the United States, have been implicated (former Yugoslavia, the Gulf, the genocide in Rwanda, Afghanistan, Near East). Accordingly, televisions in these countries needed images to illustrate these events.

At the same time, the authorities wanted to have a better control over the broadcast images. Even if on September 11th 2001, we saw nearly live images of the attacks against the twin towers of the WTC in New York, the images of corpses were nearly non-existent: a few bodies in shrouds in front of the Pentagon. In addition, is there a need to be reminded that the wars after the end of the Cold War have been imageless conflicts?
As a reaction to this desire to control, news reporters want even more to go and see what is hidden from them, taking sometimes huge risks, as the rise of deaths in their ranks in the last years sadly shows.

New rules

There is another reason for the multiplication of violent images: a change in the structure of the audiovisual media. Initially, public service was the dominant model in television. In the 80s, this model was eroded and lost its role as a reference. Consequently, the rules of discretion and restraint that used to guide the crews of public televisions when they were filming the events, the rules that in a way applied to all the members of the industry, have gradually faded away.

In addition, the progressive domination of the private sector logic leads to cutting costs and to a deregulation of the audiovisual industry. It encouraged the filming of shocking images, images that stood out and made you a “good” operator, with all the risks that finding them entail.

The changes could be also noticed in Belgium. For example, the images broadcast by the RTBF during the discovery of the bodies of An and Eefje in 1996, images which bore the indication “exclusive”, so that they could not be used by the private channel. Another reason was to prove the abilities of the public service in an area where it is traditionally considered to be less effective.

The whole Dutroux affair allowed the justification in a way of a heavy tendency of the 90s, which has not been without influence on the multiplication of images of violence: the progressively larger part of news items in the information programmes, a tendency which is justified by a vague concept – proximity – and reinforced by the feeling of insecurity, which is very present in our societies. We can mention here the debate on the role of television channels in the maintenance of this feeling of insecurity during the 2002 French presidential election campaign.
Thus, violence has invaded our screens and the supply of images of violence has increased.

A team decision

As a matter of fact, the question of the use of images of violence or violent images can be asked in the same terms as the question about the use of any image on television. The journalist needs to answer a few simple questions: how does this scene allow me to illustrate, to show or to demonstrate the given subject? In which way does it add to the information?

The journalist is not on his own while performing this evaluation. Television is still based (but for how long?) on teamwork: during the shooting of the scene, the reporter can talk about it with his operator; if the images have been sent from abroad, he can talk with his colleagues from the international affairs service; lastly, in nearly all cases, images are edited and therefore they are seen and evaluated by another professional.

And it seems here that the sensitivity of the members of the profession is the same. When I was in Kinshasa at the beginning of the uprising against Laurent-Désiré Kabila in 1998, I received, just like all the reporters there, the images of the murder of a civilian, presented as a Tutsi rebel, which was committed by soldiers belonging to the "loyalist" army. Images of a screaming man, held by two soldiers, thrown over the guardrail of a bridge into a nearly dry river and finished off by the burst from a machine gun. These images had been shot by the Reuters agency. The same agency had shot scenes of joy around the burnt body of another "rebel". I had used the first scene, but not the second one, with the agreement of the Australian editor whom I was working with. For us, the first image was strong, without being really unbearable. In addition, it was significant: the execution had been committed by members of the regular army, by soldiers that we had seen at work in the streets of Kinshasa a few days earlier. In addition, its meaning became fully clear after the declaration made on the same day by Abdulaye Yerodia, who was the president's principal private secretary. He had called the rebels "vermin to be exterminated". The other images were much more horrible and did not add much in terms of information. Of course, they illustrated the excesses of an angry crowd, but I knew from previous experience, that they had been manipulated, if not coerced, by several individuals paid by the authorities. Today, I remain convinced that we made the right choice. However, not everyone did the same thing. The journalist is then rarely alone in front of images of violence. This does not make them any easier to manage. For me, there are two decisive criteria. First, the importance of the piece of information, its significance, the contribution of the violent image to the understanding of this piece of information, its informative efficiency. If the first criterion was respected, the (sometimes traumatising) images of accidents, news items etc, which fundamentally do not benefit the viewer, would not be broadcast.

The second criterion does not depend only on the sensitivity of the journalist or his colleagues'. It depends also on the evolution of the medium. At the time of reality television, with its excesses, violence, voyeurism, and exhibitionism, the viewers' threshold of tolerance, and even maybe, of perception, has probably changed. They are certainly less sensitive to images of violence and even to violent images than they used to be. It is therefore tempting to think that we can do more than before.

The emotional trap

The real danger is elsewhere, though. It lies in the often blinding quality of the strong image. An example: after the Serb troops retreated from Kosovo, televisions were submerged by images of mass graves of Albanian civilians. Cameras were taken *en masse* to these graves. They would take back what are called "good images." The communication between the news editors in Belgium and those, who like me were in Pristina, sounded like the dialogue of the deaf. They would talk of the mass graves, while I and my colleague from the VRT would answer: do not let yourself be abused; the real question today is not the massacres of the Albanians, but the survival of the Serbs in the region. A survival that already looked nearly impossible and which we were trying to illustrate by news stories filmed in both communities. At the end, people in Brussels would consider that we were not working enough on the current events because our images were not as "strong."

And there is also this impossibility of the reporter to explain the strong image, once it has been used. When he uses strong images (especially violent ones), the TV journalist does his job: he informs using the image. But quite often, the images are not put into perspective and they are not explained. Today, even more than yesterday, we need to be fast, the subjects have to be short, and few programmes devote more than one slot to a problem. Moreover, there are not many who, after having broadcast strong or violent images on a topic, give themselves the time to go beyond the images.

The danger of the strong image and, therefore, of the violent image is that it conceals the information that it theoretically should support and that it provokes the confusion between the document and the information, between emotions and reporting. It is clear that this danger sends us to the limits of the medium itself, of this extraordinary tool of knowledge and information and which is often used today to serve purely commercial purposes.

The Courage To Show Violence And To Refuse The Unbearable

Dominique Demoulin,
RTL-TVI journalist

According to the poet Darwich, the written word hurts without spilling blood. So does the spoken word…

I have not been often confronted with physical violence during my work, but I am close to this daily, sordid, sometimes "abnormal" violence of news items.

The courts are a place where violence of this kind, without images, often without shouts, can be found, from this paedophile priest and the unbearably painful stories of his victims to Pastor Pandy and the surgical precision of the way in which he sliced up his victims.

There are acts of violence to report on, because through the courts, society defines the rules and judges these deviant behaviours. Also, the violence that the victims experienced has to be shown on their behalf, but everything is a question of balance and appropriate coverage. And no deontological code tells us how to achieve this balance, how to define the right way to cover such an event. Sometimes, it is just a question of decency.

In the "Sainte-Ode paedophiles" trial in June 2002, crude terms, sex, alcohol, the mindlessness of a "family" filled the hearings with loathsomeness and despair.
The reporter is alone when he or she hears hundreds of sordid details, alone with the nausea, alone with the rush to prepare the material in time for the 1 o'clock news, alone with the choice of mentioning the names of the accused and of showing their faces or not. In case you wonder, their faces were shown on air. It must have been difficult for them and their families. It was nothing in comparison with what they did to the young victim, but the role of the press is not to dispense justice… All the same. That day, during the live link, I was looking for words to relate the moral and sexual violence that was exposed at the trial and I chose to highlight a detail among many others: early in the gloomy mornings, the fourteen-year-old girl had to receive a "client" before going to school. I believed that giving more details would have been inappropriate, even complacent, but one needs a little perspective and time to think about it. Tight schedules do not sit well with uncertainties and philosophical considerations. In addition, the danger of complacency in the presentation of acts of violence is quite real, because this "guilty" voyeurism may be very close to the desire to denounce. To denounce, for instance, the torture that Dutroux inflicted upon Julie and Melissa. Some will say, "There is no need, we can imagine." On the contrary, there is a need to do so, because of the danger of weariness settling in and because Dutroux claims to be the victim in the agony of the two little girls. "I was in prison, I found them dying when I came back," he explains. Should we relate his "sweetening" words? Or describe the living conditions of the two little, including the most horrible details? How can I express the reasons why I had to go regularly outside after reading a few pages from the investigation materials?

Time is what we often lack. A minute-and-a-half or a two-minute story imposes radical choices and prohibits long comments. It is frustrating, and even violent, but it should not prevent the journalist from putting things into perspective. Relating police reports and minutes from the proceedings is not enough. It is important to provide investigation items, which unravel Dutroux's lies, to show contrapuntal images, be they the faces of the little girls or their white coffins, all this in order to present the violence committed by Dutroux without writing a 'News of the World'-like story. In this and in other cases, I always refused to broadcast autopsy reports. It is by choice. The medical jargon "dehumanises" the victim instead of relating the suffering of the human being. Sometimes words have to be violent, but not inhuman.

When's it on, mister?

Philippe Jourdain,
Télé Bruxelles journalist

11 pm on the Saint-Jean-Baptiste square in Molenbeek (Brussels). Since the beginning of the evening, the police in riot gear are trying to quell a number of very violent young men, among which there are gangs from other, sometimes remote, areas of the city. The taunts and the cobblestones are filling the air. Half an hour earlier, a TV Brussel camera operator was evacuated after having been wounded to the face with a stone. Jean-Michel and I are ducking and making our way under the projectiles. He is looking through the viewfinder; I am looking to the sky, just in case …

Without warning, the police move suddenly a hundred meters back. We are isolated, in the middle of the battleground, stuck between the actors of the conflict. Soon, we are facing ten very aggressive young men. This always happens. Their resentment is now exclusively directed at the camera. The discussion is dragging on under the flying stones and cans. We are corrupt, we lie, we misrepresent the truth, we film them only to discredit them, to show only the bad side of the story. We have heard this hundreds of times in the "hot" districts of Brussels. And then, to our big surprise, the tone changes:

- When's it on? Tonight already?
- No, it's too late for that. In tomorrow's news.
- Which channel, mister?
- It's written on the camera: Télé Bruxelles.
- Cool!

U-turn. Armistice. Back to safety in complete amazement.

The whole paradox is there. In these districts, the film camera is often seen as a threat, as an instrument of deception, and even aggression. But also, it is seen, and not only by the youngest, as a wonderful and mysterious object. The latter, avid TV viewers, are happy when it is their turn to be on film. Whatever the reason…
A TV crew is never perceived neutrally. Of course, we go to great lengths to remain in our role of observers and to avoid becoming actors of the events. But we have to acknowledge that our mere presence has an influence over the events, which is a serious paradox in itself for reporters…

Even worse, we may sometimes trigger the explosion of violence. Determined groups, whose aggressiveness lies dormant like an apparently sleeping volcano, may become active when we appear. How many times have we seen demonstrators turn into rioters when our camera appeared? The phenomenon of television as mirror may explain this attitude. These groups need to be seen, "recognized", to give meaning to their behaviour. Even if they absurdly risk being identified and prosecuted. Common sense is of little use against Narcissus.

This is the reason why we try so hard to anticipate, to reduce, and even to eliminate the danger of becoming involved in incidents. Every reporter and camera operator is made aware of the measures to adopt to avoid affecting the situation. First, in the case of a confrontation between the young and the police, we take the time to evaluate the situation before unpacking the camera. It is unthinkable to turn up without preparation at any more or less aggressive gathering. We need to be certain that the fact does indeed require coverage in our news programmes. Sometimes, we drive around in an unmarked vehicle to take the measure of the situation. Even when they look calm, some areas in Brussels can ignite very easily. We try then to be accepted by the population by using "relay" persons.

Most of the time, they are field social services workers or local inhabitants that are particularly well integrated in the area. They give us advice, but sometimes they also come along with us. In addition, they reinforce our safety in the most explosive situations, which is quite an important factor. All these measures do not cover all the situations and sometimes we must rely on our imagination and improvise.

Our efforts would quickly turn to nothing, if we did not follow a deontology while relating the acts of violence. We are extremely careful when we write the commentary to the images we have just filmed. We try to avoid stirring up emotions, stigmatising and, of course, being aggressive. This is an indication of responsibility, and not of hypocrisy or self-censure: we need to evaluate the impact of our statements. We have closely followed this process in the case of the recent murder of two immigrants Schaerbeek by an fanatical racist with ties with the far right. Under these circumstances more than under any other, the media had a role to play beyond providing information. We were there at the service of social cohesion.

TV crews often play the role of catalysts of emotions, be they aggressiveness, joy or pride. It does not only happen in relation to the angry and sometimes marginalized young men on the streets. Even in the classiest circles, the camera affects the behaviour and one can hear: When's it on, mister?

Does competition explain everything?

Benoît Grevisse
Professor at the Université Catholique de Louvain
Member of the Observatoire du récit médiatique

Is violence on television the result of commercial competition? It would be tempting to answer in the affirmative. Studies carried out over several years by the Observatoire du récit médiatique (UCL) have shown among other things that the number of deaths in the news programmes has increased. Even if it is probable that the competition between private and public channels is playing a part in this increase, it is certainly not the only factor.

If we focus only on the media, we can point out some elements that would explain the change of the relationship to violence along with other current tendencies in the media. The first element is the role of economic considerations. In a democracy, the journalist is under a double constraint: the respect of his mission to exercise freedom of expression in the name of the public and the profitability of the company that he or she works for. Public service would traditionally create a space devoid of competition. In Belgium and elsewhere, the carrying out of this mission has become even more difficult, because of the increase in the operating costs, especially in a situation when public television is increasingly dependent on revenues from advertisements. This debate appears to be as old as the question of privatising television. It reappears regularly, just like it did recently in France, but the only solution put forward (more or less openly) is the rush to attract more viewers.

It should be noted however that the commercial nature of the media enterprise is not a new thing. According to Dominique Wolton, "competition has always existed in the media" ([1]), and, because of the standardization of the communication space and the sources of information, journalists must look for differentiating elements. Observing the output of competitors in all the media determines the selection of treated subjects and contributes to make their content uniform. Wolton advances the idea that this dynamic is part of a tension between the affirmation of the individual and the recognition by the professional group.
In other words, the decision regarding which violent images go on air is determined by two elements. On the one hand, the feelings brought up by these images are a factor in attracting the viewer and take part in the process of generating good ratings. On the other hand, the ethical limit that the journalist uses in his or her judgement is influenced by what the journalists belonging to other channels do. In this respect, the deontological initiatives of some channels, which defined internal codes specifying what may be and may not be broadcast, are outflanked by the practices of the competitors. If a given image was broadcast by another channel without reaction or sanction, the limit is implicitly pushed out and further away.

In his account of the constraints on journalistic practice, Boris Libois indicated that "the pressure of the competitive market between the media would be reinforced by the increase in the speed of the information flow." ([2]) It is obvious that the production and circulation of images from armed conflicts and, even more often, from news items, increases the stock of violent images. It is also striking to note the increased broadcasting in our countries of police intervention programmes from the United States. From an information point of view, the value of these images is extremely negligible, which indicates that they are shown only for their sensationalistic qualities. The technological determinism of the journalistic practice would be essentially marked by the acceleration of the information flow. Competition and acceleration combine to reinforce the loss of journalistic criteria. The lack of time, the urgency would be then the ultimate excuse for any violation of the fundamental deontological principles.

In order to understand this shift towards a complacent attitude towards violence as a pure spectacle, we need to replace it in a broader context. Basing himself on the works of Umberto Eco ([3]) and Dominique Mehl ([4]), Boris Libois distinguishes in the structural modifications of television another determinism concealing the journalist practices and the discourse. If, according to Umberto Eco, the shift from "paleo-television" to "neotelevision" has created the confusion between information and entertainment, if the enunciation overrides the content, we can also suggest that the "messenger" function ([5]) has disappeared or been minimised in favour of a "relational" function ([6]). Violence in television has no value in itself, in what it says about the world, but in its morbid power to fascinate as a spectacle.

It is certainly very tempting for the media professionals to hide behind the global evolution of the media. How would it be possible to maintain a sort of occultation of the violence taking place in the real world, when violence is the recurring motive of a lot of fictional or entertainment shows? Beyond the rhetorical justifications, we can see a relevant question. The journalistic practices have been at the centre of attention in the critique of the media for decades. This may be partly justified. However, it is legitimate to ask why the production of movies that, through an excessive aesthetic presentation of violence, make it commonplace, does not systematically implicate the film industry and its members. One answer would be that profitability is their only consideration. However, it may also be the trace of our uncomfortable feelings towards violence. Our society talks continuously about violence, as if it wanted to keep it at arm's length, tame it and exorcise it.
But its anchoring onto reality through the information rekindles our fears. The critique of journalistic practices regarding violence serves a real purpose. We can also ask ourselves whether its function is not to maintain our balance in relation to our fear of violence. This critique ensures a – hypothetical – mastery of our relation to violence, while we admit that we do not control it elsewhere. But does this safety valve function still belong to a discussion about the ethics of the media?

1 D. Wolton, "Le journalisme victime de son succès", Médiaspouvoirs, n° 13, janvier 1989, p.60.
2 B. Libois, *Ethique de l 'information. Essai sur la déontologie journalistique*, Bruxelles, Ed. de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1994, p.14.
3 U. Eco, *La Guerre du faux*, Paris, Grasset, 1985.
4 D. Mehl, *La Fenêtre et le miroir. La télévision et ses programmes*, Paris, Payot, 1992.
5 D. Mehl, 1992, p. 31.
6 Idem, p. 15.

PART THREE

On The Screen

A debate with the news directors

Round table with the RTBF, RTL-TVI, Télé Bruxelles and AB3

With the ultimate responsibility for the information which is broadcast on their channels, the chief news editors are deeply interested in the debate over violence in the media. What is their line of conduct in this area? How do they justify decisions that are sometimes criticised? We have invited for a roundtable debate Jean-Pierre Gallet, news director with the RTBF, Marc de Haane, news director with Télé Bruxelles, Stéphane Rosenblatt, news director with RTL-TVI, and Erik Silance, chief news editor with AB3. The debate was moderated by Jean-François Dumont, associate chief editor with Vif/L'Express and *maître de conférences invité* at the UCL.

According to a British survey, 70 % of violence is found in news programmes and 20 % in fiction programmes. The report by TNS on insecurity in the French media showed that before the presidential election in May 2002 violence had twice as much airtime than employment issues and eight times as much airtime as unemployment. Do you think that nowadays violence is more present in the news programmes?

Stéphane Rosenblatt:
Yes, physical violence is more present. The first reason is obvious: the technical possibilities and, therefore, the very short reaction time allow TV crews to be on the site of the event very quickly. Many people have portable cameras and the odds of getting live images of the events have never been as high as now. The quantity of available violent images is certainly larger than it used to be.

Jean-Pierre Gallet:
As far as the facts themselves are concerned, few things actually changed during the last two decades. The posse still gets into town and some teenagers still do not survive their own desire to live at a hundred miles an hour. The difference is that daily violence has become an electoral argument in the Western democracies and that television navigates with more or less luck and intelligence through the landscape of crazy suburbs, often serving the cause of order and fear. We can also say that the proliferation of news programmes, flash bulletins and the appearance of 24/7 information channels contribute to the multiplication of the same scenes being shown over and over again, increasing thus the viewer's feeling of insecurity.

It is also because the channels ask for these images …

Stéphane Rosenblatt:
The world is violent. In conjunction with free access to information, we have quantitatively more violence.

Erik Silance:
There may also be fewer stories that would explain the acts of violence. Fifteen years ago, the media would try to have more eyewitnesses, more opinions leading to understanding. Today we have more raw images of violence.

Stéphane Rosenblatt:
I do not quite agree. The currently most extreme acts of violence are taking place in the Near East and we are trying to present it in a pedagogical way, to put it into perspective. The audience may not always hear it and have the impression that we give it only images. However, in the French-speaking part of Belgium, there is the awareness that things have to be put in context.

We often ask the crews in the field to report on what is at stake in a given situation, rather than to follow what the BBC or CNN do and to reproduce a factual coverage, which we cannot quite afford to do.

Do you have the same observations concerning regional television channels?

Marc de Haan:
There is practically no international dimension, but the quantitative increase of violence is noticeable on the local level, because acts of violence are on the rise there as well. I am not talking only about physical acts, but also about the violence in some discourses or social situations.
We are experiencing them more and more. Violence in schools, for example, is a recent topic. And even if we do not have any images of the events, the stories that we broadcast contain a lot of tension.

Jean-Pierre Gallet:
Isn't the debate about violence in the TV news used to conceal two other debates? I am talking about the insidious violence that our "deregulated" society imposes daily upon women, men, children, and families and about many fiction programmes that show hundreds of sadistically appalling acts of violence and desensitise the viewers to their atrocity? These programmes are imported from a continent where the exorcism through death penalty allows the cowboy from a Texan ranch to think himself safe from the "serial satan"…

This is also a question of journalistic choices, which, by imitation or competition, make you pick these facts for your programmes and magazines, isn't it?

Marc de Haan:
Maybe, but I don't think it's the main factor. It is not what local televisions traditionally do.

Jean-Pierre Gallet:
Thanks to the advances in technology, TV news covers much more ground and is able to present directly acts of violence, which before were discovered in documentaries, photos or in the press. The TV news programmes become thus a formidable instrument for the denunciation of injustices, and for the advancement of democracy. Conflicts, wars, racial hate, social injustice and daily violence have all been given a face thanks to the TV news programmes.
Some days, it's unbearable, but that's the way it is! We have to live with it, since we manage to live with ourselves. There is no more violence than before, but there are more reporters and cameramen to film it and bear witness to it.

Stéphane Rosenblatt:
I also think that the news teams have become more responsible. Competition could exist when RTL was asserting itself in relation to the RTBF, an institutionalised public service, which would refuse on principle to cover some types of local news. It is certain that the news item, with its violent dimension, was a way for us to differentiate ourselves. As time went by, the channel opened up to all the facets of current events, including international events, and the changes of the news crews is marked more by the increase of responsibility than by incidents.

We know that viewers are attracted by violence. Does this fact push you to broadcast it on the news?

Erik Silance:
No. Because of our policy, we broadcast violent sequences only if they have a significant scope. We would not report isolated acts committed by unbalanced people, even if we know that it would attract some viewers.

Marc de Haan:
For a regional TV channel like Télé Bruxelles, popularity is built upon a specific alternative policy. Therefore, even if the other channels had a strong tendency to privilege violence, we would naturally steer from it.
TV Brussel, the Flemish-speaking regional channel, does not have the same attitude and give much more importance to news items.

Stéphane Rosenblatt:
The public, it's the society we live in, it's the viewers at which we direct our programmes.
The news programme has to be the most authentic reflection of this society and we aim to reach the largest number of people. It is not an exact science. Every morning, we ask ourselves what the real concerns of the citizens are, what affects them. In this context, violence is an important element of life in society. However, we do not wonder whether yesterday's ratings would have been better if we had broadcast this news item rather than that piece of information!

But how can one justify the image of a man who kills himself while skydiving or the image of the man who dies of a heart attack during a trial?

Marc de Haan:
As far as we are concerned, we do not show this type of material. Several times, we had images of very spectacular and tragic accidents on construction sites. We showed the crane and explained what happened, but we did not show the corpses. There is no point in showing them. Theses images have no informative value.

Erik Silance:
I also think it is a question of meaning. The image as spectacle has in principle no place in a news programme, unless it conveys information.

Stéphane Rosenblatt:
Let us not be hypocritical. We work in television. We have the course of events and the respect of human dignity. Showing in close-up the victim of an accident covered in blood is not in the values of our culture, in the name of the respect we owe to the person, to her parents, to the sensitivity of our viewers. However, in some cases, like in the suicide bombing in Jerusalem, the reporter asked us to broadcast the images of the bomber, who had been blown to pieces. He did not want this type of attack to become abstract, impersonal. It was our editorial responsibility to show it, so this type of events would be more understandable. Another example: on September 11, we asked ourselves whether to show or not people jumping from the towers of the World Trade Center. I believe that we were right in deciding to show it, because the scale of the events would not otherwise allow the viewers to understand that it was essentially a human tragedy.
The general principle is that the decision to broadcast images must be discussed. A journalist cannot take on this responsibility alone. It is also a trial and error process, and by definition, some errors do occur.

When does the discussion start?

Stéphane Rosenblatt:
The chief editor is responsible for the daily programming of the news. The topics are assigned in the morning and through the day. The journalists in charge of the topics know that they have to come and talk with the chief editor when problems arise. They know the process well enough to consult continuously with him.

Erik Silance:
The system is similar at AB3. The topics are analysed by the editor in chief or by me and the discussion happens naturally.

Marc de Haan:
Same procedure at Télé Bruxelles. However, we need to realize that cases of moral or social violence are more difficult to identify. Anyway, the postulate is to make the journalists aware of their responsibilities, with a clear reference to codes of deontology and to the twenty page internal document on the editorial line.

Jean-Pierre Gallet:
We cannot avoid the question of managing this stream of images, including the violent ones. A clear editorial line, an internal code of deontology, warnings and recommendations on the air are all indispensable.

Written rules at AB3 and RTL as well?

Erik Silance:
No, we do not have a particular document. Our points of reference are the professional code of deontology and the respect for personal dignity.

Stéphane Rosenblatt:
We have an internal set of rules on deontology and objectivity. They are currently under review. The new document under discussion is aiming to integrate the currently absent concepts of human dignity and individual responsibility of the journalist. But personally, I have my doubts regarding the texts. They are just beacons. The editorial teams are living organisms, which need to react at any time to the evolution of society. The perception of the same piece of information may vary according to the context. So it is better if a news item is treated beyond its factual dimension, but if it is treated only in this way, because it answers the expectations in terms of information from the people who want to know what happened close to where they live. Not every news item presented on RTL has a “meaning” and I accept that, as long as the way in which it is presented respects the principles outlined above.

There are external institutions, such as the Conseil supérieur de l’audiovisuel (CSA). What is your opinion on its utility and its role?

Stéphane Rosenblatt:
The CSA is instituted by law, and therefore must be respected. However, we can question the criteria used in the decisions, when they pertain to the journalistic practices. Some of the complaints for “gratuitous violence” filed with the CSA were totally absurd and bordered on censorship, like the ones about the broadcasting of the images of the Palestinian child shot in front of the cameras during the Intifada. We are able to judge whether a sequence has an editorial value at a given point of time, while the CSA works on different premises, which are formulated by people who do not know the profession and do not try to get to know it.

Marc de Haan:
There have been no complaints against us filed with the CSA or from the public, so the question is not really a problem for us. It may be explained by the type of violence (less obvious, more insidious) that we present on regional televisions and to which the public is less sensitive.

Erik Silance:
I prefer reflection to regulation. My fear is also that the existence of regulatory bodies alongside the civil and criminal courts confuses the public, which does not know who is competent over what.

Stéphane Rosenblatt:
It is certain that journalists are firmly attached to self-regulation. Their relationship with the public is certainly not as disastrous as some would like us to believe, when they present the irresponsible media facing a "victimized" public. I would like to add that RTL has not received any complaints and very few real objections about specific facts in relation to violence. I believe there is a discrepancy between the importance given to the discussion at the political level about external regulation of the media and the reality of the media in the French-speaking Community.

Marc de Haan:
It may be related to a general feeling based on the total offer of programmes, which goes beyond the television channels of the French-speaking Community…

Stéphane Rosenblatt:
…and to the fact that the people who talk about it may be poor viewers, who watch few programmes, probably because they don't have the time to do it.

Do you fear that the pressure of this debate might force you to produce "visually correct" programmes, which would give a smoother, nicer image of the world, with no violence whatsoever?

Marc de Haan:
As far as raw violence is concerned, yes. However, the situation is more complex than this, especially when it comes to security issues, which are very present in the news.

Stéphane Rosenblatt:
After we had been condemned by the CSA, the journalists had a tendency to censor their own work. We had an internal discussion about it and we concluded that we had to carry on working as we used to, with a new awareness of our responsibilities. We should not be guided by external pressures or by the turbulence of a political debate, like the one that occurred in France in Spring 2002 during the presidential election campaign. Politicians attacked the media over the quantity of news items that were being broadcast, but none of them said what the media should be doing.

But, between the two rounds of the presidential election, the coverage of news items was reduced by half. This means that they were not necessary…

Stéphane Rosenblatt:
Unless it was a self-censoring reaction of the media, which were afraid of the influence of the political arguments on the public! In any case, I believe that in the French-speaking Community, there will not be any significant change in the way news items are treated as the electoral period approaches, if the points of reference are clear and if we follow our editorial line.

Otherwise, it would mean that external influences have been at play. What is at stake here is the very concept of independence.

Erik Silance:
I feel no pressure on AB3. The only pressure that should be discussed by the editorial teams is the pressure form the public, if it manifests itself one day.
A short-term reaction to an electoral deadline seems very dangerous and totally counter-productive.

Marc de Haan:
I cannot imagine the political debate having an influence on the volume of news items treated by a medium. The two phenomena must remain separate. The political debate will be covered and the word "security" will be uttered more frequently, but not by us…

Since the frequent reports of news items may induce a feeling of insecurity – and therefore an electoral behaviour – isn't your social responsibility put into motion?

Marc de Haan:
It certainly is, but we are not in France, nor in a similar situation. What we say is that there is no reason for us to change the way we process information. Questions of security evolve with the society and we consider them, without hastening or reinforcing it.

Jean-Pierre Gallet:
There are two complementary ways of approaching the issue. First, the journalists have to replace the information in its context, especially in the case of violent events. Secondly, the viewers must realize that the image is essentially a vector of emotions and a formidable machine to produce fantasies, which requires a dialogue to take place, within the family or the group, in order to structure the reflection around a number of more rational codes.

Stéphane Rosenblatt:
It is true. In this type of debates, the citizens are too often forgotten. Their access to information has never been so wide and varied. Television is only one of the instruments they have at their disposal. I would deplore that the citizens step down from their own responsibilities and ask the media to play the roles of teacher, parent and charismatic leader. We do not claim a monopoly over the daily provision of information to the citizens. They should not content themselves with watching RTL.

Among several ideas suggested by the French CSA, there was an identification code – or, at least a warning – for violence in the news. Would you be favourable to such a system?

Jean-Pierre Gallet:
Such a system in the news programmes would be an aberration. It would be perceived as the introduction of an additional hierarchy in the information and would create confusion between reality and fiction in the minds of the less sophisticated viewers.

Stéphane Rosenblatt:
The news is to be watched in a responsible environment. The parents are responsible if they let their eight-year-old watch the news alone. By its very nature, the news contains violence and it is absurd to put into place an identification code to put everyone in the clear on this matter. And what would be the criteria it would be based upon? However, a verbal warning is always possible.

Marc de Haan:
Indeed, we can warn the public that some images are particularly difficult to watch. But I fail to see the usefulness of an identification system for the news…

Erik Silance:
…and it may be dangerous as well. This would lead people to think that one can establish a hierarchy between realities, between degrees and types of social, physical and moral violence. It's unthinkable.

Mostar: the testimonies you never saw

Patrick Remacle
RTBF (L'Hebdo) journalist

Mostar, ex-Yugoslavia, December 1992. We have been traversing a Bosnia-Herzegovina ravaged by war for over a fortnight now. Violent conflicts, villages in flames, massacres, displaced people on foot vanishing into the snow of mountain paths. So much for the setting.

To Mostar, therefore. The town is in ruins. We have a rendezvous with Bosnian policemen in one of the classrooms of the Music Academy on the bank of the river Neretva. Earlier in the day they had suggested a meeting with refugees who had crossed the front-line in the morning. Three young women, Bosnian Muslims. They come from Foca, a town situated in an area controlled by the Serb forces of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The interview lasts ten minutes. Marina, who has encountered refugees before and will go on to meet more afterwards, acts as a translator.

Philippe, the cameraman, who worked throughout the Yugoslavian wars, is filming. André, the sound engineer, for whom this is the last report before his retirement, is recording. And as for myself, I listen, a lump in my throat. I listen to the terrible phrases uttered by the youngest of the women from Foca. She recounts the scenes of rape and torture she was submitted to for weeks on end. So Philippe films, André records, Marina translates, and I cry. In fact, we are all crying, overwhelmed by this woman's terrible words, her youth definitively crushed and snuffed out. You have not seen these images on your screens. We decided not to broadcast them. What you did see, however, were other testimonies dealing with rape, but less blunt, not as hard to hear and listen to. They were testimonies we gathered a little later from other refugees from the same town.
The information was therefore passed on. But we decided to protect the viewer by erasing the most terrible aspects of these testimonies. And yet in the images that were not broadcast there were no rotting bodies, nor corpses shredded by shrapnel pieces. They were worse than that, much worse.

I have the good fortune to work for a company which, in general, has confidence in those working on the ground. A company where it is possible to work with closely knit teams used to working in conflict zones, conditions which are indispensable for successful shooting in this type of situation. It is, in effect a cardinal rule of TV reporting, and even more so in countries at war: a report only succeeds in its shooting.

Factors such as camera angles, the type of shot, including use of close-ups, plus the sensitivity and collusion of the team members and the journalist all play a role in determining whether or not the reporting of an event is hard to take but still presentable or something appalling, even unnameable.

August 1995. In two days the Croatian army has retaken Krajina, which had been in the hands of Serb separatists. More than 200,000 Serbs flee the area. Ten days after the beginning of this operation we are the first team to work in the area without Croatian military monitoring. The situation is still a very fraught one. With a little on the ground experience one can easily distinguish recent and 'older' corpses. The colour of the body, the darkness of the blood, the smell, the flies. This might appear disgusting on reading, but it is very important to date the death and to determine its cause. In this case if the corpses are 'old' they are the more or less direct consequence of military conflict. If they are more recent they are victims of activity following the recapture and therefore come under the category of war crime.

In a pit: two bodies, two men, a father and son recently assassinated. The son has had his right hand severed. Their faces are hidden by the grass. We showed these images in medium shot, without lingering on the bullet holes. In the commentary I indicated that the son's hand had been severed but without using close-ups. We tried to render these images acceptable to the viewer because these corpses in a pit on the way to Knin were newsworthy. We tried to make these images, certainly hard to take, as less shocking as possible. In order to edit these subjects I could take some time to think. Unfortunately that is not always the case. In the different wars I have covered I have had the chance to work for L'Hebdo, a magazine for whom the editing is carried out on returning to Brussels, and for the televised Journal, but more often in places where the means of satellite transmission are not available or geographically very distant. Editing in these conditions has the advantage of offering time to think, which is indispensable if one wants to avoid the seductive trap that is the image as spectacle. But the horse has bolted. Effectively, the miniaturisation of the means of broadcasting and the economic pressures which insist on rapidity and the at-all-costs scoop have turned television war reporting into a job which is not only physically dangerous and psychologically complicated, but also a domain in which the traps of 'cathode-pseudo-modernity' make themselves felt more and more. We are pulled, if I can say so, very rapidly to the quickest, the most bloody, the most tearful. And because of that, the conflict is presented in its most black and white terms: the 'good' (we are on their side) and the 'bad' (we are against them), and any consideration of putting the war into proper perspective is neglected. We must therefore slow down and check this galloping horse. Because, without stepping back, without reflecting, good reporting does not take place.

PART FOUR

The Effects

The effects discussed

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A recent study carried out by American psychologists, which appeared in March 2002 in the prestigious journal *Science*, finally provided proof that consuming television is directly linked to the degree of young people's social aggressivity. The researchers followed 700 young adolescents for eighteen years. According to the inquiry, 5.7% of young people who spend less than an hour in front of the television had committed acts of violence, whilst 28.8% who watch more than three hours had carried out criminal acts. In the middle, of those who watch between one and three hours, 22.5% found themselves in a similar situation.([1]) Laurent Bègue, a French psychologist, adds that 10% of this delinquent behaviour was directly linked to violence seen on the television or at the cinema.

These studies therefore tend to give credence to an idea which has been growing more widespread (and aired, for example, when a mad gunman carries out a massacre in a public place for no apparent reason), according to which the excessive viewing of violent images leads to crime, above all amongst young and immature viewers. Such a correlation is tempting, even if only a single aspect is focused on and other elements are ignored, such as socio-economic criteria, the young delinquents' family background, their personal psychology, or their educational standard. Furthermore the study is carried out without any precautionary points concerning methodological procedure and amalgamates the hours spent watching television with the number of violent images seen without specifying the programmes watched (news or fiction, programmes for adults or for young people) or the viewing context (a child watching television alone does not watch a film in the same way as he does if he follows it in the company of parents who can offer a reassuring role).

Briefly, these studies privilege the idea that a violent image has an immediate effect on the viewer, as if he was a pure receptacle, incapable of critical distance, and only capable of swallowing the images and conforming to the model of social behaviour they suggest or offer. The reality is however more complex and studies on the effects of violence offer contrasting interpretations. The arguments tend to be balanced between the necessity of showing images to reflect the reality of the world and the voyeuristic perversion the images provoke.

The first debates on this televisual 'monster-making' sprang up at the time of the Vietnam war when a sequence was sent around the world showing a young twelve year old girl running along a road, naked and terrified, in order to escape aerial bombardment. In the 1970s it was Stanley Kubrick's film *Clockwork Orange* (for a long time banned from television screens in numerous countries) which raised questions concerning violence in works of fiction broadcast to the homes of people who hadn't taken the explicit step of going to the cinema to see the film. The debate again flared up with intensity, first in America and then in France, when Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* was considered responsible for the criminal behaviour of certain young people who had wanted to reproduce for real the murderous trajectory of the film's heroes. ([2])

Real violence, fictional violence

One must first of all distinguish clearly between what is 'real' violence (with all the necessary reservations concerning a 'real' which has been captured by a cameraman, edited, given sound and commentary by a journalist, and thus has become a constructed 'real') and what defines fictional violence.

Numerous inquiries, notably American, regularly condemn the violent behaviour of young people affected by the hundreds of murders they see daily on television, the numbers having the effect of making this transgressive act appear commonplace. But the numbers discussed include all violent sequences, with no distinguishing between the news, advertisements, films or soap operas. Yet all recent studies on the reception of media use show that the public has internalised, from a very early age, generic categories either in general terms (reality versus fiction) or in specific terms (serial versus soap opera, detective film versus thriller, fantasy versus science fiction). ([3]) In brief, what one consumes is not television as such but very different programmes shown in succession. This is confirmed, by way of an example, by a study carried out in Belgium in 1997 and which considered a representative sample of adolescents. To the question, 'For you is there a difference between fictional violence and real violence?', 73% replied that there was a difference, whilst 12% said it was the same thing and 15% had no opinion on the matter.

Therefore, a crime in an cartoon, in a police series, or in a sequence of televised news, does not carry the same weight or have the same effect on the viewer, if it is considered that the viewing is done in more or less the same type of situation, relatively speaking. Other inquiries looking deeper show that the same sequence viewed in different contexts leads to different effects. A violent image seen by young children, unaccompanied by parents, without commentary by a third party and without being reframed through an intersubjective relationship, has a more traumatic impact than one seen in an environment allowing exchange and a different focusing. Therefore, without wishing to exonerate the producers of audiovisual programmes from their responsibility and their need to reflect on the choices they make, generalised approaches, looking at the notion of effects among others, should be avoided and be replaced with a more precise knowledge concerning use, and such studies are far from being carried out as empirical studies are difficult to carry out and difficult to interpret.

Different views

The first American studies, in the 1970s, revolved more around the notion of frustration. The theory was that the improvement of social conditions for the middle classes makes them more desirous than before of new consumer goods. The sheer volume of television advertising and its exhibition of desirable objects increases the frustration of dissatisfied consumers and therefore generates social violence (minor delinquency, theft). Accumulated frustration leads to an increasing number of individual acts (here it is not even necessary to consider if violent images have been screened). Later studies centred on the form of the aggressivity which precedes the actual expression of social violence. ([4])

The basic hypothesis is that violence shown on the television contributes to the development of aggressive behaviour, which can turn violent, and that it therefore encourages greater social violence. This is the implicit postulate of numerous studies *a priori* establishing a link between the images of violence and the real violence of the spectator. This raises a first question concerning the effective link between the provocation towards violence and the actual crossing over into acts of violence. Beyond pathological cases, abundantly covered by the media, but which nonetheless remain exceptional, the causal link is difficult to demonstrate outside experimental simulations carried out in the laboratory, that is to say in situations which do not correspond to social reality. Filming in a laboratory the excitement felt by an individual watching violent images does not allow the inference that in a real situation this stimulation would be transformed into violent behaviour against a third party. The same applies for the opposing hypothesis, that of catharsis. This model rests on the idea that viewing violent scenes releases built up frustration, thus reducing the temptations of violent behaviour and, because the tension has been relieved, leading to greater peaceful behaviour. Therefore television, having a calming effect, leads to a reduction in social violence. Yet this model, first defended by Aristotle in order to explain the social role of Greek tragedies (the first examples of the public representation of very violent scenes), whilst being intellectually seductive, and verifiable in the laboratory, has never been confirmed on a macro-sociological level, in other words in a real situation involving a large number of spectators.

The adherents of psychoanalysis or social psychology for their part privilege models of identification or imitation. Much as children reproduce the behaviour of their parents, they are tempted to imitate the violent behaviour seen on television, above all if they are not disapproved of on screen, for example if they are committed by sympathetic characters, and if they are not disavowed by parents if and when they are present. In these cases, ritualised violence (for example that exhibited by Westerns) leads to less aggressivity than non-ritualised violence, and real violence (for example sequences shown on televised news) leads to more actual violence than does fictional violence. Moreover, a frustrated viewer or one in a bad mood will be more receptive to it than a viewer comfortable with himself. These approaches highlight two essential elements. The first is the fact that the viewer does not merely reproduce an act seen on television, but through this gesture links himself with a system of values. It is not a question of pure, naïve imitation, but a more or less conscious choice of a particular lifestyle. Next, this kind of choice is dependent on the viewer's environment and state of mind. If the violence is reframed by the family, and if the spectator's psychological state is positive, he will not give in to negative influences. It is not therefore a question of an effect which is inevitable, but of effects of identification which can be activated when the viewing environment is unfavourable.

Other approaches suggest that this massive exposure to televised violence has the effect of making it mundane or unexceptional. Because violence appears to be ever-present it seems to be the normal way of sorting out conflict, it becomes more accepted and it seems less questionable to resort to it when problems arise. But again this model rests on a causality which it is difficult to demonstrate, especially because it highlights the role of television to the neglect of other social factors. If the consumption of violent scenes can affect the levels of tolerance towards social violence, it seems excessive to believe that it can increase the temptation to cross over into actual violence. There is a significant gap between a level of indulgence towards screened violence and the fact of a person actually committing a misdemeanour or crime.

This is even more the case when one considers that the increased consumption of violence can have diametrically opposed effects. It can lead some viewers to have a skewed perception of reality and to overestimate the place of violence in society. They believe they are living in a universe of crime where criminals are waiting on every street corner, and accordingly adopt a security conscious state of mind (demands for the toughening of punitive judicial sentences, wishes for the strengthening of police infrastructure, desires for strong political government). As much took place during the 2002 legislative and Presidential elections in France. The media highlighting of crimes and other factors led to social and political discourse being confronted with the idea of insecurity and led to a strengthening of police and judicial powers. The highlighting of violence therefore leads to a greater demand for social control, normally aimed at reducing acts of violence. In this case the televisual exhibiting of violence (the question is not asked whether it involves an increase in levels of violence) has the effect of ushering in increased repressive measures. The direct consequence is that in this case repressive measures with very visible effects gain the long term upper hand over preventative measures.

Finally, one type of study tries to show a link between heavy television consumption and the learning abilities of young people. Youths watching the most television are also those with the most educational failures, which it is argued leads to their having bad social etiquette, progressively internalised, leading to social disengagement and, therefore, to crime. If and when victimised they will be more inclined to imitate deviant models found on the television and to reassure themselves by following negative examples, those marginalized like themselves in the world of television. We have come full circle but, again, this explanation doesn't take into account the fact that television, as well as these situations, must be placed in their family and wider socio-cultural contexts.

Contextualising the effects

This shows that violent and disturbing images can be subjected to very different types of analysis and have varied social functions. A violent image has no value in itself, but only takes on meaning at its point of enunciation and consumption. This forms the whole debate provoked by campaigns using shock images, developed by NGOs such as Medicine Without Frontiers, or, in another register, the advertising posters conceived by Toscani for Benetton. The emotion provoked by such images is said to have positive connotations because they lead to, or want to lead to, reaction, mobilisation and engagement. This whilst the same images could also appear to pertain to a logic of sensationalism, this term being thus connotated pejoratively. In the two cases however, it is the relationship between the object produced, just an image, and its reception through an emotional logic by a given public which is at stake. And it is known that the dividing line between emotion and sensation is difficult to determine, how much the distinction between the emotional and the instinctual is sometimes tied to ideologically marked assessments.

Finally, the debate must also touch upon the place and the meaning of these violent images in our contemporary society. If the sociologist Denis Duclos has been able to show that the Americans' fascination with the figure of the serial killer is a reflection of the confusion of a society which hasn't been able to manage its human / animal link, and which has been unable to integrate its darkest sides, we need to ask ourselves about the emergence of death in our European media ([5]). If the violence seen is reframed by the family, and if the spectator's psychological state is positive, he will not give in to negative influences. It is not therefore a question of an effect which is inevitable, but of effects of identification which can be activated when the viewing environment is unfavourable ([6]). Which we need to learn how to manage socially, instead of distancing ourselves from it by means of, amongst others, unjustified rationalising discourses with very little grounds.

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Children stressed by violent images : consequences and remedies

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Journalists often have a difficult job and I don't want to make them feel guilty. On the other hand, the violent images one sees more and more of on the television screens, notably on the news, present problems our society must debate, and the journalists are directly concerned in this debate. It is as a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst that I became interested in the consequences of images. Numerous consultations and therapies, as much with children as with adults, convinced me that images are not sufficient in themselves to provoke the desire to adopt certain types of behaviour, but that conversely they provide models for those who are looking for them. These models are often offered in fictional series but they also present themselves through news sequences. The fact that the images produce models is neither good nor bad in itself: one can learn useful things watching television, even if one can also learn to imagine oneself a bank robber, or how to part an old lady from her bag. But, once again, it is not sufficient to see a model to want to imitate it: the desire to imitate originates in several factors, tied notably to the personal history of each person and to social and familial background.

The second conviction I acquired through working with children, adolescents and adults who say that they have been disturbed by images (whether advertising, fiction or news) is that images can only seriously traumatise those for whom they awaken past trauma they have actually experienced and which has been buried in their psyche. But we see also that this power is not inevitable and the images which reactivate trauma can also lead to some improvements in dealing with it, and finally to a resolution. For that it is necessary that the images are always clearly defined in terms of what they are and, in this regard, the manner in which televisual information is shown has an important role to play.

Children and images : new hypotheses

I undertook, in France, research for the Minister of Culture and the social affairs department. It consisted of studying the effect of violent and non-violent images on children aged between eleven and thirteen. This was in effect fieldwork as the youngsters' involvement took place within the educational establishment that welcomed them daily. The images concerned fiction but also televised news. The results obtained can be summarised in three parts.
First of all, non-violent images gave the children much more pleasure (in approaching half the cases) whilst violent images led to negative emotions, such as distress, fear, anger and disgust (16% felt all of these emotions). Furthermore, the violent images were more demoralising and the children who saw them displayed signs of depression.
The second important feature uncovered by this research is that the stress stimulated by the violent images is not inevitably transformed into traumatism. Children have a number of means of managing the stress of violent images: words (the violent images made them talk much more than the non-violent images); internal scenarios which consist of images that the children willingly talk about and through which they represent themselves in the same or similar situations (violent images bring about many more such scenarios than non-violent images); and finally non-verbal expressions – the mimicking of gestures (violent images lead to many more non-verbal expressions than non-violent images). The fact that these non-verbal expressions are always consistent with the language and the internal scenarios which the children evoke verbally shows that there exist three complementary methods at the children's disposal to manage the effects of stress and avoid them being transformed into traumatism: words, images and sensory-motor expressions.

The third and final point consists in the fact that the stress caused by the violent images also leads to a greater development of herd mentality on the part of the children: the children who had seen the violent images more easily gave up their individual characteristics and were quicker to align themselves with the decisions of the group, and notably those of their leader.

Fiction and the news

Are the images in fiction and the images seen on the news considered the same? As part of the research I showed the children five sequences each lasting two minutes. They consisted of a fictional sequence featuring boys, a fictional sequence featuring girls, a third featuring both girls and boys, a cartoon sequence (specifically *Ken the Survivor*) and a sequence of televised news (the particularly cruel footage of American marine hazing rituals which was broadcast at peak time two years ago on most French channels).
The research revealed that the two sequences which provoked the most displeasure were the cartoon and the televised news sequence. This may be due to the fact that both featured a person striking the chest of another. But the research shows above all that the two sequences (cartoon and news) were those to which the children referred mostly in terms of 'the frame' and less in terms of the hero. By 'frame' I mean to say the conditions of construction and broadcasting of these images. For example the children said about the cartoon: 'the colours could have been more cheerful,' 'the little girl runs as if she was never tired,' and concerning the news clip they said: 'I hope my sister doesn't see it' and 'I wonder how these great images were made.'
The fact that the two most disagreeable sequences were also the two which stimulated the most discussion of 'the frame' leads to the thought that discussions on 'frames' could be one way of managing the stress caused by images. To put things more simply the children who feel badly disturbed by images try to understand how they have been made and this questioning establishes a form of distance which protects them from emotional stress. This form of defence is evidently linked to the greater interactiveness with images that children nowadays display: they are not content to merely look at them, but they construct them more and more, be it with photographic equipment, camcorders or software enabling one to play around with images. But that is not to say that they shouldn't be encouraged to go down this route, all the more so as social inequalities threaten to split children into two groups: those who come from advantaged backgrounds whose relationships and leisure activities encourage the development of this different relationship with images, and the rest who don't.

A politics of encouragement

Television has a major role to play in avoiding the digging of a chasm between privileged and other children, by making sure that all the viewers exposed to violent images have the means of managing the attendant stress. It is clear that the banning by political powers of broadcasting certain images cannot resolve all the problems, but that is not to say that everything can be shown at all times. It is important that the whole of society establishes the guidelines, taking into account broadcasting times and the channels concerned, for determining what can or cannot be shown. A democratic society is not a society without rules but a society in which the rules are clearly defined, as well as the punishments for those who infringe the rules. In the field of images these rules cannot be inviolably fixed as things change rapidly. The production of scenes of real sexual relationships in the cinema as well as the growing number of news images showing live footage of death means that the public are more accustomed to these types of image, even if one might regret it! Furthermore, the greater public tolerance of these images does not increase solely as a result of getting used to them, but also because of the younger generations' different reactions to images, reactions they establish quicker and spontaneously. When young people are confronted with images that disturb them they no longer ask, as their parents and grandparents did: 'What does that mean?' or 'What was the author trying to say?' Instead they ask: 'How was it made?' This is why moreover why programmes explaining how the images have been constructed must be more numerous than they are at the present in order to develop further the sense of this critical distance, this different relationship with images, deployed more and more spontaneously by the young.

Amongst these programmes a number should be devoted to the construction of news images. Their big problem is that they effectively work hard to reflect the world exactly. They don't allow the viewer to say to himself: 'Don't be scared, it's not real, it's cinema, it's special effects.' They insist on being reality itself. However, all journalists know very well that news images, just as all other images, are framed according to camera angles, then cut, selected, mounted, accompanied by commentaries and finally put into a sequence which conditions their reception. News images are not a reflection of the world; they are constructions built on current affairs events, the gaze of the cameraman and various broadcasting constraints. Television has prospered because of the myth that it is a window opening onto the world. It is this myth that today has to be demolished to enable viewers to establish a critical distance *vis-à-vis* these images and to prevent them becoming traumatised.
But this perspective means that we should change the reference points according to what matters in these images: the new perspective that we suggest should be adopted no longer privileges what semioticians call 'the referent', in other words what one has in front of the lens; it also no longer privileges the work of the creators of these images, even it recognises their part in their construction; this new perspective privileges the viewer of the images in accordance with the effects they have on him.

Showing the other side of the picture

The research I carried out for three years shows that young people have a number of means at their disposal of managing the stress of violent images. I ask you to see these means as nothing other than key factors to be applied in negating the effects of these images.

1. First of all a very significant majority of children use language as the main means of dealing with the stressful effects images have on them. But it is only possible for them to use this method if they find a speaker ready to accept, support and validate the representations they construct as a reaction to the stress caused by images. The role of parents in this area is essential and the dialogical process must be given more encouragement than it is at present Instead of inviting parents to check which programmes children can watch or not, what should be stressed is the importance of family viewing, and the family's verbal exchanges. Acronyms or indicators could be created, such as 'family viewing recommended,' or even 'to watch and discuss together.'

2. For children, another significant way of working through the stress of violent images consists in understanding the way they have been constructed, notably in terms of the special effects which enabled their construction. This understanding constitutes a form of distancing which allows the child to distinguish between images which dominate their thinking and those they see on the screen. Television should promote programmes along the lines of 'the making of.' Here an incentive based politics is preferable to a politics based on dissuasion. The government has the means to oblige channels which show violent programmes at peak time to also broadcast 'the making of' programmes at the same peak time. A system of correspondence could be established whereby for every film considered dangerous by the CSA a corresponding 'the making of' programme of a certain length would also be shown. It would be up to the channel to finance the making of such a programme and to show it on the same day and at the same time, a little like the right to reply found in the press.

3. Image-centred education is at present thought through on the basis of aesthetics and semiotics: it consists in teaching children to recognise quality criteria or the way the component parts of an image have been arranged. Our research shows, however, that it is through the emotions that images have signification and that one has to start there. It is important that the teachers involved in teaching image-centred education try to get the children to first of all evoke the sensorial and emotional aspects that the images have made them feel.

4. If many children use language as the privileged means of working through the effects images have on them, and a number of them need to be able to actually create images, others can only use these methods if they have first put into bodily form or expression the effects the images have on them.

In other words these children must have recourse to playful forms of imitation: talking in a way similar to the people they have seen acting like them, to engage with and playfully perform the same gestures they have seen, represented as having been performed for real on the screens. In order to allow every child to work through the effects of images have on them it is essential to offer them role-playing activities. Such activities could be carried out at school where a significant number of children seem to use gestures and shared emotions as the best way to work through image provoked stress. They should be led by teachers specially trained in such activities.
The research activities could be carried out by involving children already receiving supervised education, as well as children in certain 'problem' regions or neighbourhoods. They would consist of setting up role playing groups led by a non-teaching member of staff specially trained in group dynamics. They would allow them to become aware of the emotional consequences images have and also of what happens in groups. Above all, by inviting them to place images on their emotional stresses – to visualise them, they would make the children more open to the teaching activities offered to them and to benefit fully from them.

So that images can inform about themselves

Let us end with two examples from the news in which the journalists in my opinion could have played a key role in preventing the traumatic effects images can have. The first concerns the sequence of American marine hazing rituals I used in my research. The sequence broadcast by every French channel contained an extract in which the cameraman who filmed the event focused the lens on a black marine who is allowing himself to be tortured by a white marine. However, at the edge of the image, in the same sequence, we see a white marine submitted to the same torture carried out by another white marine. The marine is resisting the torture and hitting the people who are trying to pin a medal on his chest. Thus, it appears that the person who constructed this image – or the person who selected it – opted to use a single point of view. He didn't film the hazing rituals as they happened in reality, which would have been in any case impossible, but filmed them in such a way to highlight the violence of a white person against a submissive black person who allowed himself to be tortured.
My second example concerns a sequence shown on French television. It features South African policemen setting their dogs on black illegal workers. Whilst the television presenter took care to specify that the sequence was difficult to look at, it was totally unbearable. But it wasn't so only because the scenes showed us real victims suffering at the hands of their real torturers. The cause of this uneasiness lay in the fact that the whole sequence had been filmed by a policeman and thus obliged us to assume the position of the torturer. It would have been extremely useful had the presenter highlighted this fact and also visually demonstrated it. In order to do so it would have been sufficient to show a fictional sequence in which a similar event was shown from the point of view successively of the victim, the torture, an onlooking stranger and even – why not? – the dog, as would nowadays be possible through computer generated images.
The difficulties faced by journalists, and which I mentioned at the beginning, are not to be underestimated. On the one hand they have to provide us with news about the world; it's their job and their vocation. But, on the other hand, they should also teach us to better understand this new object that is the image. And to do so they must not only invite viewers to think in words about the images they show us, they must also make images which demonstrate the logic of images. In this regard the possibilities of computer generated images are generally under-used in the image-centred education that the channels should put in place.
Images are not only sources of information about the world, they are sources of information about themselves. Up until now we have only explored the first function, but now it is essential that we explore the second.

By the same author

- Psychanalyse de l'image, des premiers traits du virtuel (Dunond, 1995)
- Enfants sous l'influence, les écrans rendent-ils les jeunes violents? (Armand Colin, 2000)
- L'intimité surexposée (Ramsay, 2000)

Children and September the 11th

Anne Merkelbag
Editor of the RTBF programme, 'Les Niouzz'

'Les Niouzz' is a daily RTBF programme, co-produced by local television groups, and aimed at children. Television news for those aged eight to twelve, the programme deals with current events, therefore also current violence, a problematic section of the news – perhaps even more so when it is aimed at children. Each programme involves discussions at the heart of the team concerning the choice of words and images. This was especially the case for the attacks of September 11th, 2001. It was exceptional in this case that we discussed the event on the same day as the broadcast. Normally we don't broadcast factual sequences before the television journal of 19.30. It is a choice: no scoops, no rush in digesting the news before reconstituting it.

That evening, however, we very urgently put into place a special programme. It was shorter – six and a half minutes instead of the usual nine minutes – and consisted of a chronology of the events in the US, the reaction of the US President, and an analysis of the event and some explanation of the very notion of terrorist attack. It seemed important to us to provide the children with certain keys to understanding and following an event that could not be avoided: all the channels had dispensed with their usual programming and multiplied the broadcasting of these violent and spectacular images. The children were confronted with these images for several hours.

We interact a lot with our viewers – letters, drawings, email – and this interaction was heightened by the September the 11th attacks. If adults congratulated us for having very quickly supplied keys to understanding the event, the youngest correspondents displayed a certain amount of fear: fear of dying, fear of a Third World War, fear of other attacks. The animated nature of their responses led us to try to reply very quickly to all the questions on air. Thus we again had to make a special programme the following day, with the help of specialists: child psychologists, the foreign affairs ministry, and political pundits.

The image and the word

Our working method never varies, no matter the current event. The attacks of September the 11th did not make us stray from our permanent concern: avoiding spectacular images which exaggerate the words without really providing information. We set aside images of Americans jumping to their deaths when the Twin Towers caught fire; we ignored close-ups of blood-soaked Israelis, their arms torn off, after terrorist attacks; we avoided close-ups of somebody ill and at the end of their life when we discussed euthanasia (all these images were available to the televised journal). We do not tone down the news, but we don't accentuate it with shock images.

An adult's perception of violence is not necessarily the same as that of a child's; what might seem trivial to an adult can really shock a child. We know for example that anything to do with the animal world can really upset our young public: a hedgehog taken care of by a animal rehabilitation centre; an injured giraffe in a zoo; kangaroos – of which there are too many – slaughtered in Australia; dolphins washed up on a Normandy beach; emaciated polar bears suffering because of global warming; all these affect some children. It is also the subject above all others to which our viewers react, by mail or through drawings.

On television the news can have a disproportionate effect due to the rapid turnover of news broadcasts (a sequence lasts on average for two minutes) and to its ephemeral character (it's impossible to repeat the viewing). This effect can be exaggerated by a child's personal baggage.

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PART FIVE

The Signposts

Laconic Professional Codes of Ethics

Martine Simonis
National Secretary of the General Association of Belgian Professional Journalists (AGJPB) and the Association of Professional Journalists (AJP)

The French-speaking Community of Belgium's professional code of ethics contains few provisions concerning the journalistic treatment of violence on the news. Which are the texts? Are they known by the profession, are they useful, and are they applied?
And beyond the texts, how can the self-regulatory practices of the profession be improved?

The texts on ethics

1. The 'ethical codes applying to the broadcasting of television programmes containing scenes of violence.'

Adopted in 1994 by those in charge of the French-speaking Community of Belgium's channels ([1]) and the Audiovisual minister, this code concerns all television programmes and aims at all forms of violence (physical, verbal or moral). This text does not have a legal or statutory scope; it consists of recommendations to which the channels freely adhere. Most of the provisions are explicitly concerned with fiction and advertising, but a certain number concern news programmes or could be relevant to them:

Article 1.

When broadcasting programmes or films containing scenes of violence likely to offend a significant number of viewers, they should be warned in advance by the broadcaster.

Article 2.

As far as possible, precise details concerning the scenes of violence will be provided, as long as it seems that this information will have no other result but a preventative one.

Article 6.

The broadcaster will take into account that a large number of children watch news or information programmes.

Article 8.

The broadcaster will see to it that all programmes produced internally are the object of vigilant care at each stage of their conception or production.

2. Internal company codes

Only the RTBF has produced an internal company code.
RTL-TVI has not produced any of its own ethical code documents; as for the French-speaking Community of Belgium, whilst each television company has various regulations at its disposal relative to the treatment of news, none of the provisions are directly concerned with violence.

The RTBF internal code concerning the treatment of news and the ethical codes of its personnel, adopted on the 19th of January 1988, consists of one point specific to the subject of violence.

Article 41.

Conforming to the respect for human dignity, the journalist will treat with tact every intrusion into the suffering, physical or moral, of the victims or their families and will avoid as far as possible the showing of purely gratuitous scenes of violence.

3. Other reference texts

The 'Declaration of journalists' duties and rights' ([2]) contains no measures concerning violence, and none that could be even indirectly applied.

One finds, on the other hand, but by way of comparison only, that the Code of journalistic principles adopted in 1982 by the written press concerning the news in general ([3]) contains two specific measures.

Article 5.

Editors, editors-in-chief and journalists must respect a person's dignity and right to a private life and must avoid any intrusion into physical or moral suffering, unless considerations concerning the freedom of the press make it necessary.

Article 6.

The presentation of violence: crime, terrorism and other acts of cruelty and inhumanity must not be glorified.

The relative weakness of the standards

The small number of ethical provisions applicable to violent news images but above all the generality of the concepts they embody is striking: first of all, the very notion of 'violence' is not defined. Next, if the instructions 'warn in advance' and 'provide details concerning the content of the scenes of violence' are clear and simple as to the procedures to adopt, the other standards leave the journalist quite lacking when he has to deal with a violent image: 'provide vigilant care,' 'treat with tact every intrusion into the suffering,' and 'avoid the gratuitous screening of violence' can all have different meanings according to each person's perception of 'violence' or its 'gratuitous' character, of 'suffering' and according to the news context in which the images were shot. Also, if the reminder to 'take into account that a large number of children watch news or information programmes' might be useful, it offers no ethical benchmark which might be useful in asking editorial questions – to broadcast or not, wholly or in part, 'violent' images?

It is the very nature of ethical codes to tend towards a certain generality concerning concepts, in order to incorporate the largest number of cases they might apply to; or, in other terms, more precise or focused texts might not be applicable if they are not adapted to the diversity of situations professionals encounter on the ground. Instead of attempting an impossible definition of violence in the news, other concepts could be more useful: recently the Ethical Council of The General Association of Belgian Professional Journalists recommended that one should 'also take into consideration a respect for the families of victims and to avoid giving details which add nothing to the public's information but could understandably hurt the victim's family'.([4]) It concerned, in this particular instance, the squalid news-in-brief trivia reporting of the daily press but the recommendation could also be applied to images and their commentary.

Looking for ethical standards in the raw material of our neighbouring countries does not offer many useful paths. It is necessary however, in thinking of using concepts which are less general and more specific, to draw attention to a directive by the Swiss Press Council: ([5]) 'The producers of accounts and reports of dramatic events or acts of violence must always weigh with care the public's right to be informed and the interests of the victims and those concerned.

The journalist will refrain from all sensationalistic reporting in which a human being is reduced to an object. This is particular the case for people dying, people suffering, or the case of corpses, reference to which in text or image exceeds, through the details described, or by the length of the duration of the shot or the size of the close-up, the limits of essential and legitimate public information.'

Evaluating the way television companies consider ethical codes concerning the broadcasting of programmes containing scenes of violence has really highlighted the difficulties of applying the standards because of the generality of the concepts they use.([6]) In all cases it seems that the evaluation and reviewing of violence on the screens is made very subjectively. Personal opinion prevails over the ethical codes.

Conclusion

A profession's ethics is not limited to the codes it itself produces. Professional practice as a whole needs to be taken into account. In the case of violence, debates between journalists show that whilst the codes can prove useful, especially during periodic 'media crazes', it is essential to keep a watch on the conditions in which news is produced, and to improve them: professional training, preventative measures, dialogue, looking at practices beyond the company itself are as necessary for improved self-regulation and news coverage as the guidelines already mentioned.

- initial journalism training: this must include a substantive ethical standards course, given by professionals.

- permanent training: retraining schemes, other than adapting to technological innovations, are practically non-existent.

- the conditions in which the news is produced: professionals state that the rhythm of work (delays, the number of subjects looked at) and the deficit of journalistic staff allows no time for essential distancing and contextualistaion: the increasing use of IRJs ([7]) is an example.

- Dialogue and team work: ensuring that the journalist faced with difficult editorial decisions is not isolated; the introduction of flexible procedures for consultation across the hierarchy (heads of staff, editors-in-chief).([8])

- Internal and external appeals: debates amongst professionals will stimulate interest in, even the necessity for, discussion forums and advice on ethical matters (ombudsman, ethical standards advice); this would allow not only the evaluation of ethical standards practice but also slow down the drifting that brings about the sometimes frantic competition between channels.

Beyond the codes, the permanent worry concerning the quality of the news necessarily touches on improving self-regulation. The options outlined above should not remain pious wishes. But the road is often long. The AJP ([9]) has worked for two years to create a Journalism Council of the French-speaking Community of Belgium, a body which will replace the existing Ethical Standards Council and will include, beyond professional journalists, representatives from media groups' management (including audiovisual companies) and representatives of the general public. Lacking any consensus amongst the players involved, this project still has the look of a building-site.([10])

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1 RTBF, RTL-TVI, Canal Plus and community or local channels.
2 An international text adopted in 1972 by the journalist associations of six European countries, including Belgium, and then by the International Federation of Journalists.
3 A text drawn up and agreed by the Belgian Association of Newspaper Editors, The National Federation of Weekly Newspapers and The General Association of Belgian Professional Journalists.
4 Recommendation of the Ethical Council of The General Association of Belgian Professional Journalists, the 25th of March, 1999, in 'Les Cahiers de 'Journalistes", July 2000.
5 Swiss Press Council directive No.8.3.
6 Evaluation of how professional codes of ethics concerning broadcasting televised scenes of violence are respected, carried out by 'L'Observatoire du récit médiatique' under the leadership of Benoît Grevisse, the 26th of February, 1999.
7 Image Reporting Journalists. A journalist working alone on the ground who takes care of image, sound and editing.
8 This can be read about in 'Evaluation of how professional codes of ethics concerning broadcasting televised scenes of violence are respected' *op.cit*. It describes the internal practices, formal or otherwise, of each channel.
9 Association of Professional Journalists. This is the French-speaking Community of Belgium's wing of The General Association of Belgian Professional Journalists.
10 On this subject: Philippe Leruth 'Deux années vers une impasse' *Journalistes* March, 2002.

Image Rights: Which Rights, Which Images?

Stéphane Hoebeke
RTBF Legal Advisor

Image rights can be defined in two ways: first of all in relation to the person represented and secondly in relation to the media which reproduces a person's image.

a. An individual's right to his own image.

Everyone has a right to his own his own image and can therefore in principle oppose its being taken, reproduced and broadcast, be it a drawing, a photograph or a video. Again it is necessary that the person is recognisable and can be identified.

Image rights are principally a creation of case law and are centred on individual rights. They are recognised in part by the law (for example Article 10 of the 30th of June, 1994 law concerning author's rights and which protect photograph and picture rights). These rights are not absolute and acknowledge limitations, primarily associated with news rights.

b. The rights of the press to disseminate an individual's image

The freedom of the press is a public freedom and a human right guaranteed by the Constitution. The right of the press to inform the public incorporates the right to disseminate images connected to the information. One cannot have a real information rights without the right to be informed through images. The press has the right to give its public the news through text and image. There is no reason to make a special case of image dissemination or to think that images form no part of news information. As C. Bigot writes, 'an image allows the news to be given substance and gives it its real impact. (…) Images are not antinomical to the news, but on the contrary indispensable to informing a large public (…) Images are a fundamental part of the public's collective right to be informed.'([1])

In the inevitable conflict between an person's right to his image and the press's right to broadcast images, one must consider the first is eclipsed by the second when rights to information prevail, or in other words, the demands of news making take precedence. Any conflict of standards or norms relating to variable image content can be resolved in the light of Article 10 of the European Convention of Human Rights which includes the rights to freedom of information and freedom of expression. This article should be required reading for everyone.([2]) Concerning the right to information it is necessary that the limits of interference are legally recognised, that they have legitimate objectives and are proportional (the famous 'public interest imperative' insisted on by European case law). The judgement 'New Verlags' passed by the European Court of Human Rights on the 11th of January, 2000, in favour of a magazine which published the image of a member of the Austrian far-right suspected of making letter bombs perfectly illustrates the question.

The conflict can be expressed by the following axiom: everybody has rights to his own image and can challenge its use without prior authorisation by any form of media, except if its use is justified by the status of the person concerned (a public figure) or by the recounting of a contemporary or historical news event in which the person participated; justified, in other words, by legitimate public interest.

By public figure is meant a person exercising a public role (members of royal families, members of governments, legislative assembly members, also candidates for such public positions, magistrates and religious ministers), public personalities, celebrities and stars.

In the term news event, news is to be understood in the largest sense of the word to include law, cultural, sporting, political, economical and social news.

In a dispute concerning, amongst others, the parents of Julie and Melissa and the editor of 'BZZTOH', the judge specified that 'when exercising image rights there must be room to consider the public's right to information, which arises when the news goes beyond the private sphere and becomes a matter of public interest; in such circumstances a person's image rights in some sense cease to belong to the individual and become encompassed by the public's right to information'.([3])

Sensationalistic or violent images

Article 24 of the directive concerning radio and television bans the broadcasting of programmes containing gratuitous violence. But what is gratuitous violence? The legislator has not defined it.

Whilst journalistic objectivity precludes all forms of sensationalism, there are loosely defined borders between the so-called sensationalistic press – where the pejorative connotation is linked to pure commercialism and unhealthy profit derived from suffering, misery or human vulgarity or baseness – and the press which disseminates sensational and exceptional news information which appeals to the imagination and provokes a very emotional response.

When does the dissemination of images of war, terrorism or barbarity cross the line dividing the legitimate from the illicit? For me two elements can be kept in view in all cases. On the one hand, the intrinsic gravity of the images, their shocking and traumatising aspects, as seen by a significant section of those the images are aimed at. On the other, the absence of news interest – in the pedagogical rather than the commercial sense – in the images, which must, to be legitimately disseminated, contain something pertinent which adds to the simple narrating of facts or ideas.

The Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers recommendation R(97)19 on the electronic media's representation of violence defines gratuitous violence through reference to 'the dissemination of messages, words or images whose violent content or presentation has a pre-eminence not justified by the content,' the latter being defined according to a number of criteria such as the type of violence shown, the type of programme (news, children's programme, fiction), the target audience, the time the programme is shown at, and whether access is free or restricted.

The Independent Broadcasting Authority's (CSA) authorisation and supervising College offered a definition on the 20th of January, 1999, on the occasion of a fine imposed on RTL-TVI, which recognised 'a violence which is not essential, or even simply not useful, in order to express an idea'; this definition was condemned specifically by the Council of State in a resounding judgement on the 5th of December, 2001.

On the 8th of April, 1998, TVI had broadcast in its televised news programme a sequence dealing with a hostage taking incident in Venezuela which had tragic conclusions for some of those involved (two were killed, including a nine-year old child) and for the hostage taker himself, killed by the local police in front of the cameras. But did these images constitute gratuitous violence? Yes, according to the French-speaking Community of Belgium's audiovisual companies' regulatory body: 'the violence shown explaining nothing other than the spectacular nature of the afore-mentioned images' – thus criticising implicitly the channel's sensationalism.([4])

This judgement was surprising, not only because it was the first penalty passed down by the CSA in its history, but mainly because it was based on a notion of gratuitously violent imagery which is not defined by any document and concerning which the Authority had never explicitly determined its own reach.

The Council of State dismissed this definition of gratuitous violence offered by the CSA because in its opinion the dissemination of images of violence must be possible beyond the goal of expressing an idea, primarily in the case of television news, which is not there to merely transmit ideas, but equally contains factual elements, notably scenes of violence. In the case in point the Council of State judged that the violence shown could not be termed gratuitous because the commentary was not irrelevant to the images, in contrast to what the CSA had decided: the commentary 'recounts the circumstances of the hostage taking, indicates that there were two victims, including a child, and that the female hostage was pregnant – each element serves to accentuate the act's odious character; it also reports the relief of the freed hostage; it is natural to ask people to consider what the victims of such acts have to endure and the risks taken by their perpetrators.'

One should stress the precise quality of the Council of State's motivation in comparison with that contained in the Independent Broadcasting Authority's (CSA) decision. It is up to the latter – and to everyone interested in the issues – to consider all the related inter-related repercussions, by using with care the concepts of variable content in order to respect the rights of all concerned, including the right to information of events which are certainly violent but of public interest.

1 C. Bigot 'La liberté de l'image entre son passé et son avenir' Légipresse 2001, No.183, II,p.83. The image is also news according to Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

2 See S. Hoebeke and B. Mouffe Le Droit de la presse, Brussels: Academia-Bruylant, 2000 pp.102-136, notably p.226.

3 Antwerp (reference), February 8th, 1999. A and M, p.241.

4 See S. Hoebeke and B. Mouffe Le Droit de la presse, Brussels: Academia-Bruylant, 2000 pp.474-475, notably p.226.

Image Rights Abroad: Four Examples

Stéphane Hoebeke
RTBF legal advisor

Image rights are not a Belgian invention and they are found in most comparable legal systems, with nuances and reservations which it is not possible to go into here.

Spain

Individual's image rights are expressly written into the Spanish constitution (art.18-1).

Quebec

The Quebec civil code states that 'using somebody's name, his image, likeness or voice for a reason other than that of legitimate public information' can be considered as 'an attack on a person's private life' (art.36). This ruling is doubly interesting in that it expressly recognises that image rights consist of the right to a private life and the public's right to legitimate information. However the text does not resolve any possible conflict that might arise.

France

France is a classic source of inspiration for Begium's French-speaking Community's lawyers, but one should be beware of false friends. French contexts are not necessarily directly applicable or transposable. Image rights, if not expressly recognised as such by the law (apart from article 226-1 of the Procedural Penal Code which punishes the dissemination without prior consent of the image of a person in a private place), are however recognised by case law, which understands it in the sense of the press's right to disseminate images.

The most recent case law in effect considers that the 'freedom to communicate information authorises the publication of the images of the people involved in an event as long as human dignity is respected.'([1]) In the particular case being considered the photograph of victim of an attack on the regional express rail network at Paris's Saint-Michel station was 'without indecency or any sensationalistic aim' and therefore was not an attack on human dignity.

This case law of course needs to be reconciled with Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights and it is by no means certain that the notion of human dignity is more precise than that of gratuitous violence. The risk of contradictory judicial decisions is not negligible. This was apparent in the case of a photograph showing prefect Erignac lying on an Ajaccio street in the moments following his assassination: on the 24th of February, 1998,([2]) the Paris court of appeal ruled that its publication during his parents' period of mourning constituted a profound attack on their injured feelings, including an attack on their private lives. One might well ask if this case law really respects the press's image rights, as it is clear that such an image directly concerns rights to information, and is concerned with a major event moreover involving a public figure. It is a symbolic image concerning both history and the present. However the Court of appeal rejected the appeal lodged against this judgement by stressing human dignity and the fact that the photograph showed quite clearly the face and the body of the assassinated prefect.([3]) It was judged an infringement of a person's human dignity similar to that of a photograph showing the victim of a road accident, a half-naked young man laid out and unmoving on a stretcher, his face covered in blood but clearly identifiable, around whom doctors and first-aid workers are busying themselves.([4])

Conversely, the publication of a photograph of a woman and her children waiting for first aid following the explosion at the AZF Toulouse factory was judged lawful.([5])

Some courts refer expressly to the right to see.([6])

The new updated Article 35 of the 1881 press laws 1881 states that 'the dissemination, no matter by what means and no matter through which medium, of the reproduction of the circumstances of a crime or misdemeanour, when this reproduction seriously undermines the dignity of the victim, and when it is carried out without the agreement of the latter, is punishable by a 100.000 Franc fine.'

Article 15 of the agreement concluded between the CSA and TFI stipulates that the 'organisations family orientated programming must take place during the hours when the youngest viewers are most likely to find themselves in front of the small screen, between 06.00 and 22.00. Within this schedule and *a fortiori* in the section dedicated to youth programming, violence, even psychological violence, must never allow itself to be perceived as continuous, non-stop and omnipresent or presented as being the only solution to conflict.'

Germany

In accordance with well established case law, a person's image rights are included in the first article of basic law. The law concerning author's rights protects photographs and picture rights, as it does in Belgium, but warns that the in the case of photographs and/or pictures being published 'aus dem Bereich der Zeitgeschichte' no authorisation need be given, the German legislator thus allowing the right to information prevail.

1 Cass.fr., 20th February, 2001 *Légipresse* No.180, III p.53 and p.54 E.Derieux; see also Cass.fr. 12th July, 2001 *Légipresse* No.187, III, p.213 B. Ader.
2 Légicom No.20, 1999, p.66.
3 Cass.fr. 20th December 2000, Légipresse No.180, III, 2001, p.57 E.Derieux
4 TGI Nanterre, 5th November, 2001, Légipresse No.188, I, 2002, p.3.
5 FGI Toulouse, 8th March, 2002, Légipresse No.191, I, p.53
6 TGI Paris; 23rd February,1999 (Utrillo) and C. Bigot 'La liberté de l'image entre son passé et son avenir' Légipresse 2001, No.182, II,p.68

The CSA, a Safety Net

Evelyne Lentzen
President of the CSA

The CSA is not involved at any moment in the production, the broadcasting or the reception of television news. Its responsibilities and influence are felt elsewhere.

It is not by accident that the contribution of the CSA features at the end of this book's journey: it is indeed after the production, the broadcasting and reception of television news where one finds framed the regulator's interventionist scope, fixed by a law whose contours and motives will be remembered here. It will certainly appear obvious to the eyes of the most initiated but there are at least two reasons why such reminders are not superfluous. First of all, because the role of the regulator is often seen by some as being that of a censor, regulation of the audiovisual sector being a recent phenomenon as much in its conceptualisation as in its coming into being and its actual practice. Secondly, because the subject which concerns us here, the news in other words, is, out of all the variety of programme content offered to television viewers, that which most crystallises fears of seeing the regulator reverting to the habits of the censor.
But what does the CSA do and what does it not do? In other words what laws authorise it or oblige it to act within a given yet unsettled social context?

The CSA is clearly not a censor. It intervenes at no stage of the production, transmission and reception of the audiovisual message. It only gets involved afterwards, when the effects of this message have made themselves felt. In the majority of cases a dossier is opened after complaints by viewers or listeners. The CSA in some ways constitutes the final filter, after the series of filters discussed in the preceding chapters: the ethical discussions of journalists or cameramen in the field faced by dilemmas such as to shoot or not, to show or to tell; the ethical choices of the editorial staff – and those of its management board – which takes delivery of the images, treats them, gets them into shape, re-contextualises them and then decides to broadcast them; the editorial choices of the traders who never forget that bidding for the programmes they offer takes place in a highly competitive sector and which accordingly presupposes a particular public demand; the choices of the public which one believes knows how to recognise the different ways according to the ways they are edited in which the same facts can be treated, hierarchised and shown.

Editorial freedom and responsibility are thus applied by news professionals and appreciated by each and everyone of us.
This final filter is applied from the point of view of standards whose range is far from being limited to the geography of the French-speaking Community of Belgium. Article 24 of the 17th of July, 1987, decree concerning the audiovisual sector constitutes in effect a translation into the laws of our community of articles 22 and 22a of the Television Without Frontiers directive which obliges 'member states to take appropriate measures to ensure that the broadcasts of television and radio programmes in their domains contain no programmes capable of badly harming the physical, mental or moral development of minors, notably programmes with pornographic content or scenes of gratuitous violence' and prevails upon 'member states to see to it that the programmes contain no incitement to hatred on racial, sexual or national grounds.'

These bans are clothed with a surprising power and legitimacy, as they comprise the only examples of limitations on the freedom of expression provided by the relevant texts which, if not respected after a formal request, can justify a European Union state opposing the reception on its territory of a programme coming from another member country.

Whilst the banning of programmes likely to harm the development of minors (for example, programmes containing gratuitous violence) features in European Union law and therefore in each one of its member states, the notion of gratuitous violence remains no less variable in time and space. This is without doubt the reason why the 'Television Without Frontiers' directive does not define it. Following in its footpath the French-speaking Community of Belgium doesn't define it either, with the problem that it risks reducing the scope of a European standard whose importance we have just been reminded of.

The gratuitous violence focused on by the legislator is inscribed in a very precise context, that of its being broadcast, and thus the ways in which it has responded to the different questions raised by each stage prior to the broadcasting: the very choice to deal with a particular subject, the choice of images, the commentary which accompanies them, the necessity of showing rather than telling, and any warnings to the viewer. This is to what the CSA reacted and responded when it decided that 'the broadcasting of violent images is unjustified and therefore gratuitous when it is unnecessary, or even not useful, in order to express an idea,' adding that in the specific example in question (the taking of hostages which ended in the killing of the hostage taker) 'the violence shown (the impact of the bullet through the skull, a burst eye, spurts of blood, among others) expresses nothing but the spectacular nature of these images, which is sufficiently demonstrated by the fact that the content and the scope of the commentary both before and during the report was independent of either the broadcasting of these images or their exclusion. The images can therefore be considered gratuitous.' In other words it was possible to provide the information without having to show the horror.

Violence is certainly inscribed in a given social and cultural context but one which is not unchanging and some of whose values, even if they appear commonly accepted and whose textures each one of us 'feels,' do not remain less open to interpretation. The role of the CSA in this area is difficult but it must not shirk it. It is also this which gives it its specificity and richness: formulating an interpretation of standards in the light of a sharper knowledge of the audiovisual sector than that offered by an ordinary court of law. If notions such as human dignity are not defined by the law it is because they should not be chained up in an iron collar which renders them either inapplicable, or alternatively applicable in so many situations that they will be invoked on the slightest occasion by those who believe, if not in a return to a moral order, then at the very least in the expression via the media of an idealised and antiseptic vision of life in society, and thus deny the existence of violence instead of suggesting ways society might deal with and manage it. It is up to the regulator, partly created for that reason, to establish its own case law capable of enlightening its future choices and those of traders who themselves experience the legitimate difficulties in understanding these notions.

The intervention of the regulator takes place in a changing and plural social context but also at the crossroads of fundamental liberties with at times contradictory effects and whose exercise, as Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights reminds us, straightaway assumes some restrictions: freedom of expression, freedom of opinion, freedom to receive or to give information, the method of accessing information and knowledge sources, and the freedom to begin setting things up…

This system, specific to the audiovisual sector – which might seem at first glance striking in comparison with the regulation of the written press, is based on the history of the European audiovisual sector. Must it nonetheless be applicable to all television programmes, in particular news programmes and, in the case which particularly concerns us here, to violent images in television news? Nothing rules it out. But this is not the sole nor the primary reason. The latter point rests on the particular responsibility of news programmes as regards each person's experience and perception of the world. Why? Because the violence is shown under the banner of transparency whilst it is instead the case that a selection process has been carried out concerning the events, news-in-brief clips and scenes of violence. Because more and more frequently forms of fiction model themselves on those of reality, which in turn inspires fiction, thus blurring genre boundaries, with the risk of making violence one at the time 'unreal' and omnipresent.

In brief the CSA sees itself as a supplementary safety net which, when it intervenes, does so *a posteriori* within the framework of the law and after debating the context of broadcast violence and considering qualifications of notions such as violence itself.

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The Five Questions of Editorial Debate

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A weekend road accident. Several cars all tangled up. The motorway is blocked. An everyday accident. Gratuitous and unhelpful images of violence or instructive images that should be shown constantly?

In the US, a fire-fighting aeroplane loses its wings and crashes in front of television cameras filming a forest fire. Sensationalistic and gratuitous images or a news event which, because of its exceptional and gripping features, deserve to be shown?

Men and woman jumping one after the other to their deaths from a World Trade Centre in flames. Gratuitous images of suffering or images which reveal the full extent of the atrocity?

When the RTL-TVI editorial team decided to broadcast images of a hostage-taking incident in Venezuala which ended badly the eventual decision was the fruit of a dilemma very much beyond the everyday. The police shot in cold blood, at the risk of injuring the hostages. They killed the hostage taker. A cameraman filmed the scene.
On the day, after a short contradictory debate the head of the editorial staff felt that the news sequence illustrated the ultra-violent methods South American police use to counter crime. The choice to broadcast the images was taken. Was it a judicious choice? Was it an objective choice?

The various parameters brought to bear on a decision whether or not to show a violent image have profound links with our culture and our environment. This culture, this sensibility, including its violence, is the source of an editorial teams' choice criteria. Every day dozens of hours of international images, often atrocious, are sent to us by large international agencies. They are the rawest reflection of the savagery of human relationships. Only a miniscule part gets onto the news. The rest is simply unbroadcastable.
Before each broadcast the following questions are debated, either informally or in the framework of an editorial meeting:

- do the images respect the integrity of the people shown?
- Do the images exacerbate human suffering?
- Are the close-ups justified?
- Is the protection of minors safeguarded?
- Does the violence have a meaning which leads to an understanding of the context of the reported subject?

All these criteria drive editorial debates. They are radically different in cultures where such filters do not exist or where, ethically speaking, everything must be shown. However, we must have the humility and modesty to recognise that these debates remain partly subjective. To sum up, a journalist makes a choice which is up for debate and not perfect but a choice for which he claims integrity and which he makes, no matter what people might say, with the aim of informing as well as possible.

The CSA judged otherwise in condemning our choice and considering the violent images gratuitous. This decision was overturned on appeal to the Council of State. It would be useless to go over the points again, points finally judged in terms of our editorial's freedom to choose. Going over them again would only prolong the polemic.

The Independent Broadcasting Authority's (CSA) decision however raises questions of principle which go beyond the mere content of a controversial news item. This example of the regulation of the French-speaking Community of Belgium's audiovisual sector substituted itself for the editorial choices of an editorial team. It was a first, with no or few real precedents in Europe. It aimed at establishing a spectacular case law, defining in an absolute manner what must be seen as objectivity when considering violence in the news. This decision was taken in the absence of wider debate and without the slightest preliminary debate with those involved in the news report.

No-one can deny the usefulness of taking stock of existing standards or regulations concerning violence and debating in order to arrive at better news reporting codes of practice which would perhaps allow us to avoid errors of evaluation. No editor-in-chief should have the arrogance to deny that there is no scope for improvement in his editorial decisions. The freedom of the press, including the audiovisual sector, means accepting that citizens can legitimately contest or strongly disagree with it. We in the French-speaking Community of Belgium have the luck to live in a culture which has wisdom and modesty concerning these issues. And the way television channels are funded, either privately or through public money, changes nothing. This allows us to debate these questions calmly and without any pressure.

The violence of the image intersects with the violence of the real, the world as it is, and this strongly distinguishes it from fiction. Asking questions about its use cannot be done independently of our vision of the world which surrounds us and our relationship with it.

Mediation, Filter or Fireguard?

Jean-Jacques Jespers
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How to arrange things so that 'the media can say everything but not say anything with impunity'.([1]) This debate rouses journalists, editors, judges and politicians but leaves the general public, the party most concerned and affected, largely indifferent. Many forms of civic monitoring of media practice have been imagined, notably the Press Council, a pluralistic regulatory body, private yet official, which today operates in sixteen countries. Belgian editors and editors-in-chief say that they prefer each media company to have its own system, whereby journalists and management regulate their own professional practice. But it is unrealistic to expect of certain businesses that they will sanction 'slip-ups' they have themselves produced because of the pressures of competition.

In order to produce a dialectic of media practice evaluation Claude-Jean Bertrand envisages more empirical and less competitive methods which he calls 'means of assuring the media's social responsibility'.([2]) Amongst these means he calls attention to the press mediator.

Today there are thirty-five press mediators in North America and twenty in Europe. Included amongst the editorial staff teams under its umbrella are those of Le Soir, El País, Diário de Noticias, Le Monde, The Guardian, La Repubblica, France 2, France 3, Radio-Canada etc. The mediator is neither the viewer's lawyer nor the editorial team's mouthpiece, but a journalist, a sage in some ways, who, on the basis of public complaints, evaluates editorial practice and makes recommendations. Regular press columns are one of the forums whereby the mediator responds to audience concerns.

There are also mediators in name only and which have no real power, as is the case for RTBF for example. In applying the management contract tying it to the Belgian French-speaking Community the public radio and television company broadcasts, as it has done since September 2001, a weekly 'mediation' television programme – 'Qu'en dites-vous?' – and an equivalent monthly radio programme. But the journalists responsible have no authority to formulate recommendations and the programmes content themselves with reflecting the public's complaints and offering the company's responses to them. In the mail (post or electronic) which is the sole source of the programmes' inspiration complaints concerning televised violent images are far from being the most numerous.

But the position of an editorial team's internal mediator remains controversial. The mediator should be a seasoned professional and ideally somebody approaching retirement. As he must pass judgement on the work of his colleagues it is difficult to imagine that he could, after one or two years, easily slip back into his place on the team. Next, journalists on the ground might see him as a has-been, lacking knowledge of a difficult profession's daily realities, thus reducing his moral authority. Moreover, the mediator risks being seen as a spokesperson for the company which pays him – which he is, willy-nilly, at certain times in all editorial teams, and permanently in some of them.

An external mediator would in many ways therefore be preferable. Some politicians in Belgium have suggested the introduction of a media ombudsman. In March 2001 the French-speaking Community of Belgium's government passed a decree anticipating the creation of a mediation service, whose reach would extend to RTBF.

Everything will of course depend on the tasks devolved to this service, the forms of its constitution and the ways media consumers can use this medium. Unfortunately the Television Viewers Association has wound itself down and large consumer associations seem not very concerned with the quality of the media. And this is a product which is so extensively consumed.

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1 Hugues Le Paige 'Les Médias et les 'dysfonctionnements', in *L'Affaire Dutroux, la Belgique malade de son système Brussels*: Complexe, 1997, pp.217-229.
2 Claude-Jean Bertrand *La Déontologie des medias*,Paris 1997, Que sais-je? No.3255

Learning to Read The Media

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News information violently assaults us. Everyday, without apparent logic, the media confront us with a torrent of news, from near or far, a ceaseless, tumultuous, disordered flood, touching on all the most varied areas, from trivial news clips to politics, from culture to sport, often insisting on the most sensational, unexpected, rare events and thus also the most negative. The mosaic built up by these materials, seductive but disparate, builds up within us a muddled image and gives us nothing of the world but a confused representation.

A terrible suspicion

As already noted by Jean Cloutier, 'destined to be received simultaneously by eye and ear, audiovisual language allows the engagement of one's whole being without the necessity of that being recreating or reforming a fragmented reality. This engagement goes hand in hand with a sensoriality it itself brings about. That is at once its strength, because it plays on an emotional level, and its weakness, because it does not allow any rigorous analysis, and the imagination does not have to complete information which arrives already complete, and engagement prevents the stepping back which enables examination and judgement'.([1]) A stepping back, taking one's distance, which the written word on the contrary favours.

Television imposes its rhythms on us. One cannot step the image nor go back. Time and space get mixed up and confuse us: one goes too quickly from the studio to on the ground events, or from live action (we are at home and the media takes us elsewhere) to repeat programmes (this time it is to the past that the media transports us). Certain facts are reconstructed, whilst certain images are archival, and nowadays that is not very clearly indicated.

Televised news has its schedules, but an extraordinary event shatters them. When a dramatic event occurs the news is prolonged and seems to become permanent. Yet this does not make it more likely that we will understand the event. As Eric Klinenberg, a professor at Northwestern University, notes that with September the 11th 'for the first time in their history, and for four days, the main television networks broadcast the news continually, without any advertising breaks. Yet, more than a week after the attack Americans, who had nevertheless watched it all, still hadn't understood much about the event that had just shattered their lives (…). Whilst television reporters often have it that they do a better job over time, here they quickly revealed their limitations. So, that the audience did not scatter too much the producers had to constantly promise 'a new event' or 'more shocking images.' Television viewers waited, passively, absorbing a thousand and one times the same images of the planes crashing, the same images of people panicking and fleeing'.([2]) On the radio, however, one could hear 'long and scrupulously constructed reports on the main questions raised by the crisis.' On the radio, as in the written press, words were not polluted by images.
It is thus television above all which makes us sensitive to the most frenzied news event, that which is distinguished by the extent, either quantitative (the number of victims) or qualitative (the excessiveness, the intensity), of its violence. And particularly when these events are instigated and put into action by outside agents anxious to influence us, manipulate us, provoke our imaginations; such destruction of New York's twin towers against a superb sky-blue background. Or the 25th of July, 1995, attack on the Paris express rail network at the Saint-Michel station: the timing had been chosen so that the public would discover the facts brutally and in the raw on the evening's television news; the confusion seemed total, journalists and ministers called to the scene had to react on the spur of the moment, their 'ehrms' multiplied, they looked for the right words but what can one say in such haste?([3])

But what if the media themselves manipulate us? A terrible suspicion. In France 'the presence of crime in the media rose by 126% between February and March, 2002, before falling by 50% after the first round of the Presidential election, according to an exclusive study by TNS Media Intelligence. Television contributed to this rapid expansion by more than 60%'.([4]) Did we notice? Did we ask questions? How to explain this outburst? Chance? Chasing the ratings, insecurity being one of the public's main concerns? (But 'in the period looked at insecurity featured twice as much as employment and eight times as much as redundancy,' two other problems fanning anxiety). Political intent? The desire to influence the electorate ? The emotions now behind us one learns that concerning certain of the most spectacular news clips (a little old man, in Orleans, at the Loiret, beaten up by young hooligans; a family man attacked in Evreux) the victims were not as innocent as first thought. Must we therefore distrust everything and no longer believe anything?

Teaching to the rescue

Television viewers, in order to remain sane, must be able to step back and re-contextualise the facts. Teaching how to read the media. That is from now on the new task of schools. 'We must teach our children to recognise and understand precise and correct information and extract it from the avalanche of facts, sounds, words and images with which we are daily confronted by,' declared the Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt recently. 'Contemporary education should not revert to merely collecting information, but to teach how to select from it.'([5])

Not gathering the maximum of information, unless it for the pleasure of accumulating knowledge or in order to answer questions in a game or in a test, but learning how to choose, decode and understand. How to extract the essential from the jumble of news. How to construct a satisfactory representation of one's environment and the world, how to form an opinion on current news by taking advantage of it in a practical and unselfish way. How to arrange one's personal life and that of those one is close to. How to decide for oneself from the facts which govern each situation.
If the means given to the Media Education Council and the three resource centres (one for each educational pathway) by the French-speaking Community of Belgium are relatively small in relation to the size of the tasks to be carried out (one of them concerning problems connected to television violence), the conferences it has organised (the most recent, in March 2002, focused on current affairs news aimed at 8-14 year olds), and the studies and initiatives it has carried out, including on the internet and the multimedia, are far from being insignificant.

Since 1996 a dossier summarising *Media and Audiovisual Education* and the brochure 'Media Education: Twelve Questions' has defined the ends and means of a pedagogical politics: how to make of the consumer of broadcasting technologies an 'active viewer, an autonomous explorer and actor within media communication.' And this is to be done without overtaxing the school programme, and without creating a specific course: there must be media teaching at all levels of the educational system and must permeate every subject – even if some are more readily adapted than others. Every teacher sees to it that their pupils speak French well, now they must equally contribute to their knowing how to read the media.
Six questions need to be taken account of. Production: who made and broadcast the document we are seeing and / or listening to? Typology: the message is bound up with what genre? Representation: of what meaning and what representation is it a messenger? The public: for whom is it intended, who can and who will receive it? Technology: which technological methods have been used? Language: what expressive processes have been used?
These questions intersect pretty closely with the famous questions Harold Lasswell offered for a scientific approach to the media: who says what in what channel to whom with what effects? Many questions, and they are what it is all about: one cannot complacently accept the messages, one must constantly ask oneself questions.

When it interests itself in the news, media teaching doubles as an education in citizenship and doubles the questions asked. The journalist, to enable understanding of news information must tell us who did what. Where? When? How? Why? The news viewer must ask numerous questions at once: why has someone done this? Why has the journalist chosen to report it and to treat it in this manner?

All this takes for granted a basic understanding, allowing for the contextualisation of information and to understand follow-up events (one also has to know the preceding 'chapters').

The programme is ambitious and media education cannot be the sole preserve of schools. It must find a place in youth movements and life-long education, and it must find a place in the family; it is up to parents to concern themselves with it, to give a renewed meaning to collective viewing, to be at the side of their children, to respond to their questions, and to comment on the images.

Parents, like all adults, must ask themselves questions constantly concerning their own critical skills, and must examine their consciences. They must ask themselves about what they watch and the manner in which they watch.
Do they succumb to or resist the media's seduction? Are they undiscriminating couch-potatoes fascinated by the screen, or viewers impervious to the media, ready to doubt all information, or pioneers looking to establish a new contract, a new alliance with the media? Are they bulimics, or do they believe in some dietary restrictions. And finally: are they spectators or actors in the life of society? Subjects or citizens? The future of democracy will be forged on the answers.

"In the French-speaking Community of Belgium a ministerial judgement on the 19th of May, 1995 by Phillipe Mahoux created the Media Education Council (CEM). With Robert Wangermée presiding and composed of leading figures representing both education and the media, its mission is to further the integration of media teaching into the education system, and to co-ordinate and stimulate the research and procedures that will promote and evaluate it. Three resource centres, one for each educational network are called on to provide schools and teachers technical and / or methodological assistance."

1 *La Communication audio-script-visuelle à l'heure des self-médias*, Les Presses de l'Université de Montreal, 1973.
2 'Ravages de la television en continu' in *Manière de Voir* No.63, May/June 2002 ('L'empire des médias'), Monde Diplomatique bimonthly.
3 Mélusine Harlé *Attentats et television* Brussels: De Boeck Université, 1998.
4 Le Monde 28th May, 2002.
5 A speech given at the World Newspapers Association Congress, Bruges, 27th Mai 2002.