1. INTRODUCTION

The “journalism of outrage” is central to the watchdog function of the Fourth Estate, often presented as a cornerstone of liberal democracies not least by journalists themselves\(^1\). It has developed as an informal regulatory principle for the practice of journalism and democratic politics since the Enlightenment.

American journalists and academics, Ettema and Glasser\(^2\), suggest that the scope and purpose of investigative journalism include *publicity* – bringing wrongdoing into the public gaze–, *accountability* –calling wrongdoers to account–, and *solidarity* –creating bonds of compassion

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between the public and those who have suffered wrongdoing. This last role is perhaps the least explored and questioned. In the frenzied world of appearance of the mediapolis, the search for scapegoats can appear to be the leading dynamic of scandal coverage.

Drawing on the work of British media academic Roger Silverstone and French theorist, René Girard, this chapter examines the role of journalism in generating a form of axiological power through the narration of scandals and the construction of scapegoats. It examines the extent to which media scandal coverage becomes less an issue of fostering compassion for victims and more a question of directing public anger against scapegoats. It explores the implications of Silverstone’s and Girard’s work for new thinking on journalistic and public responsibility.

2. THE AGE OF THE MEDIAPOLIS

Silverstone’s 2007 study Media and morality examines how the media have become “environmental” in our twenty-first century world. Writing six years later – a period which has seen the explosion of social media and smartphones – their centrality to our orientation to the world, to our relationship to others has become even more apparent. Developments at the beginning of the twenty-first century are allowing the emergence of

3. R. SILVERSTONE (1945-2006), a British academic and pioneer of media studies, published a number of influential studies including Why study the media? Sage, London, 1999 and Media and morality. On the rise of the mediapolis, Polity, Cambridge. A concern with the media’s moral power was at the heart of his academic concerns.


dispersed, “contrapuntal”, alternate and, perhaps, alternative media environments with as yet uncertain consequences for the formation of cultural, social, political and moral space. Anti-globalization activists turn the tools of a globalized world against itself as they plan their protests online; Jihadi websites help radicalise young western Muslims; Mac users support each other through internet fora and the 2011 Arab spring is partly made possible by the mobilizing power of social media.

These networks criss-cross nations and the globe, helping to create a range of public spaces which, using Edward Said’s musical metaphor, Roger Silverstone describes as “contrapuntal” to express the empirical reality of the multiplicity of voices in our contemporary media environment and also a “way of seeing the world as defined and only understandable through the relationship of self and other, of similarity and difference”\(^6\). In addition, “counterpoint underlines the melodic rather than harmonious relationship between voices and is a useful metaphor for modelling the diverse and at times dissonant global commons in which we find ourselves”\(^7\).

The world can be more or less shareable because of the media. They constitute the space of appearance. The mediapolis, Silverstone’s term, is the mediated space of appearance that also provides resources for judgement upon the world. It generates a form of axiological power, proclaiming to society its ethical and aesthetic values. The media judge, they claim to be truth tellers and they fabricate role models. They tell us what is worth watching, having and even being. In 2013, the most followed people on Twitter were Justin Bieber, Canadian teen singer, in first place with 35 million followers, Lady Gaga in second place with 34 million and Kate Perry in third place with 32 million\(^8\). Communicators are the makers of our world of reference, of our symbolic universe, connecting or disconnecting human beings and because of this the media help construct our moral universe. They can be a force for good as Ingrid Betancourt, the Colombian politician and FARC hostage for over six years, suggested on her release: “I owe a lot to the media. If it had not been for you, I would probably not be alive. Those of you who took time to give us space on the

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radio, the possibility to communicate with our families, I owe you so much”

3. GUARDIANS OF THE PUBLIC GOOD?

Journalists claim to and often do seek to serve the public good. Indeed, from the mid-18th century to the beginning of the 21st century, journalism as a practice has been legitimised by itself and society at large by its watchdog function. Its Fourth Estate role is often presented as a cornerstone of liberal democracies and an informal regulatory principle for the practice of journalism and democratic politics. Journalists “speak truth to power”\(^9\), scrutinize and highlight wrongdoing through the recounting of scandals in a “journalism of outrage”\(^11\).

However, too often for every scandal there is a scapegoat and, as Ettema and Glasser state, “narratives of villains and victims can summon moral outrage, but reliance on such narratives equips journalism with a moral vocabulary of little more than the most rudimentary conceptions of guilt and innocence”. This limited vocabulary reduces the possibility that outrage will eventually lead to a thoughtful discussion of the underlying moral issues and there is every risk that both journalists and those who consume their work become more interested in the feeling of outrage itself rather than in the creation of solidarity and concern for victims. Ratcheting up both public rage as well as the alleged outrageousness of personal or institutional behaviour appears to become the leading dynamic of journalism. Guarding the public good justifies inflaming passions and emotions that undermine the bonds that connect and create solidarity in communities despite Ettema and Glasser’s injunction that the creation of solidarity

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10. The origins of this well-known expression appear to be in the title of a pamphlet on world peace written by the Society of Friends (the Quakers) and describing their approach to working for peace in world politics. See the Quakers, “Speak truth to power”. Retrieved at http://www.quaker.org/sttp.html, 10 February 2013.

should act as a regulative ideal, a standard of performance for journa-

What is going on here? In order to understand the axiological power
of contemporary journalism, I believe it is helpful to draw on the work of
René Girard who has explored in literary texts and the ancient stories of
myths, the relationship between scandals and scapegoats and their role in
providing a safety valve to dissipate human violence. Girard is not a sys-
tematic thinker but his reflections are, in my view, helpful for illuminating
the scandal and scapegoating dynamic of contemporary media and their
public.

4. SCANDALS AND SCAPEGOATS

What are scandals? In 2006, I co-wrote a study on political scandal in
Britain and Spain which analyzed the meaning of scandal and which I will
draw upon here. The word “scandal” can be traced back to Greek, Latin
and early Judaeo-Christian thought. The original Greek terms, the noun
skandalon and the verb skandalizein, referred to a spring-trap for prey,
recalling its Indo-Germanic root –skand– to spring or leap. It was used in
a figurative way by the Greek-speaking translators of the Septuagint, the
Old Testament, to describe a trap, an obstacle or a cause of moral stum-
bbling. In this religious context, scandal came to mean a stumbling block
placed in someone’s path and, by extension, things that lead others astray
or make them lose their faith. Scandal was to cause someone to stumble.
With time, the semantic range of the term expanded so that the Oxford
English Dictionary (1989) now defines scandal in six senses:

1. In a religious context something that is an occasion of unbelief or
   a stumbling block to faith or which brings discredit on religion
   because of the conduct of a religious person.

13. See M. J. CANEL – K. SANDERS, Morality tales. Political scandals and journalism in
14. See P. A. SOUKOP, “Church, Media, and Scandal”, in J. Lull and S. Hinerman (eds.), Me-
   222-39.
2. Damage to reputation or rumour injurious to reputation.
3. A person whose conduct is grossly disgraceful or an event or circumstance which is.
4. An offence to moral feeling or sense of decency.
5. Talk concerned with disreputable behaviour or imputations of such conduct.
6. In legal terms, an injurious report published about another which may be the foundation of legal action.

The French scholar, Girard, has also examined the role of scandals in relationship to scapegoating mechanisms\(^\text{15}\). His analysis suggests that from time immemorial we have sought to control or defuse the violence which accompanies humans’ attempts to live in society. Human communities, he maintains, cannot escape the upsurge of mimetic desire, our desire for what the next person wishes for or has, leading to rivalry and conflict. Girard uses the term scandal to refer to situations which arise when our desires are blocked because of this rivalry or because the possessor of what we want cannot be displaced. We look to find behaviour and actions to reveal and publicise for apparently violating social norms. Often these occur most frequently at times of social fracture, crisis and conflict. The scandals seem to escalate, multiply. They appear to divide communities but they also unify them because, according to Girard’s analysis, scandals are also closely linked to the ritual of scapegoating.

The scapegoat appears throughout human history as both a literal creature and as a terrible human reality. For the Hebrews, purgation from sin would occur through the expulsion of a surrogate bearer of guilt: a goat upon which all the sins of Israel had been placed would be driven into the wilderness in order to die and purge the guilt of the community. In Ancient Greece, the *pharmakos* played a similar role. At times of social tension, of crisis and disaster, the *pharmakos*, usually a criminal, slave or disabled person, would be expelled from the community and punished. However, again following Girard, the post-Christian world does not easily allow us to accept the idea of scapegoating. The secret of the success of scapegoating is based on maintaining the lie that that the scapegoat is truly guilty. Our belief in this is spoilt, says Girard, at the point at which a scapegoat is revealed to be truly innocent, an event he suggests takes place at

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the execution of Jesus Christ. Here the truth is revealed that scapegoats are often innocent.

The post-Christian era does not, of course, renounce the making of scapegoats. They are too useful for that. They can help create “difference” in society and consequently restore unity; they contribute to the founding, preservation, and unification of culture. However, there is a new concern for victims, something that Girard considers to be a relatively recent historical phenomenon. This vocation of concern for victims has at times been resisted. Nietzsche and later the tenets of Nazism sought radically to extirpate this concern for victims as the core of western culture. However, victim culture, as it has sometimes been pejoratively labelled, has become entrenched in the contemporary western world and positioning oneself as a victim or underdog has even become a favoured strategy in certain unequal power struggles.\(^\text{16}\)

However, hostile transference targeting scapegoats continues, although no longer expressed so much in physical but rather in psychological violence. When human groups are divided and fragmented during periods of crisis and conflict, they can be reconciled again by finding a scapegoat/victim. Unless we belong to the persecuting group, it is not so difficult to distinguish that the victim is not responsible for all for which he or she is accused but the accusers are sincere and fervent in their accusations. This occurs when scandals break out.

5. CONTEMPORARY MEDIA AND SCANDALS

In recent times, the very texture and content of “scandal” has come to be seen as bound up in the workings of the mediapolis.\(^\text{17}\) Scandals exist in part when the media summons them into being. TV shows, tweets, radio chat shows and newspaper articles provide part of the symbolic terrain on which society’s ethical values are rehearsed and teased out and the terms and boundaries of public morality are explored. The headlines of the press...
can seem to provide the equivalent of the sentiments and judgements of a medieval morality play.

Girard points to a characteristic of scandals which appears to be reflected in their contemporary media manifestations. They always seem to multiply, intensify and escalate: paedophiles, social workers, conservative or left-wing politicians, bankers, Muslim fundamentalists, Catholic priests. Media theorists have referred to the phenomenon of “moral panic” defined as occurring when “[a] condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests”\textsuperscript{18}. Without accepting the totality of Girard’s anthropological analysis, almost exclusively centred on the explanatory variable of “mimetic desire” for human behaviour, his reflections, in my view, provide useful insights into what is taking place in media scandals.

If we examine much British press coverage of scandals, for example, a common theme is a rush to judgement based not so much on an urge to raise compassion for the victims but rather to bring down condemnation upon those viewed as guilty. In a \textit{New Statesman} article, Brian Cathcart examined how part of the British press set out to destroy the parents of the missing six year-old, Madeleine McCann, printing untruths and blaming them for their own child’s disappearance. Writing about the financial crash in October 2008, journalist Max Hastings stated, “We want scapegoats. And when we have the names, like the profiteers of the First World War, they should be perceived as men and women whom decent people will not share a park bench with”. That same year a front-page headline of \textit{The Sun} newspaper declared that the social workers involved in the Baby P case, a two year-old boy abused and murdered by his mother and stepfather, had “blood on their hands”\textsuperscript{19}. In February 2013, the cyclist and seven times winner of the Tour de France, Lance Armstrong, was finally brought to book. The media glee at his downfall owed much to his own persecution of those who had accused him, rightly as it turned out, of doping. But there was no small measure of delighted outrage at his final humiliation.

\textsuperscript{18} S. COHEN, \textit{Folk Devils and Moral Panic}, Paladin, St Albans, 1973, p. 9.

Our 21st century scapegoats can nearly always be shown to be deserving of some opprobrium but –driven by public and media outrage– there is a risk that the task of fostering compassion for victims is the least of journalists’ concerns. The manufacture of outrage and an emphasis on the outrageousness of the scapegoats becomes the leitmotif of media coverage. The public, on the other hand, believes its indignation to be legitimate, justified. But are we in bad faith? Does our supposed compassion for victims disguise new kinds of cruelty? Locking ourselves into a given identity may be part of the problem: identity is made against rather than with other groups whether this be as campaigning journalists, defenders of human rights, religious or ethnic groups, scourge of illegal immigrants or paedophiles. On the other hand, the structural logic of journalism plays into the Girardian dynamic. On the one hand, journalism practices in dealing with reality tend towards the superficial. As the BBC journalist, John Simpson, puts it20:

a great deal of what you read in the newspapers or see on television is not so much wrong as depressingly stylized. Journalists often only seem to think in terms of stereotypes: innocent victims, great leaders, evil killers, vicious dictators, tragic children, vengeful wives, love rats. Under this kind of treatment the complexity of life, which is its truth, evaporates almost instantly.

This tendency can only be exacerbated in an increasingly fragmented mediapolis in which social media, blogs and aggregated news sites appear to threaten the citadels of the professional journalist. Reining in the contagion of outrageous comment, of scandalous assertions based on rumour and innuendo is a task similar to that King Canute attempted to perform when he commanded the waves to halt and stop wetting his feet and robes.

A second structural characteristic that bodes ill for generating journalism that seeks to foster solidarity and compassion is its dominance by market imperatives. The market alone leads to what one could call the waste of the spirit: the exacerbation of individualism and the stimulation of desire in directions that produce rivalry and conflict. Harvard political philosopher, Michael Sandel, has written eloquently about the all pervasiveness of market values and their corrosive effect on social goods21.

6. TAKING ON THE CHALLENGES

One of the abiding features of the life and work of the philosopher, Rafael Alvira, is his inextinguishable hope in the face of intellectual and practical challenges and his attention to the daily work of kindness in words and actions. It is in this spirit, I conclude this chapter.

The contemporary mediapolis poses major challenges for policymakers, journalists, and citizens in ensuring that, among other things, it does not contribute to the circulation of untruths or the generation of scandal dynamics where media and public lynch mobs that seek only to punish and stigmatize. These are major challenges and they are ones that demonstrate that the analysis and practice of all kinds of communication, including journalism, necessarily involve ethical questions about the relationship between personal agency and institutions in achieving communication directed towards social and personal goods such as justice, compassion and truthfulness.

This fact can help us think about the values we might want to foster in our communicational relationships and institutions in certain types of politically organized society. In a previous publication, I suggested that journalistic practice should seek to foster a conversational mode. This would have real consequences in the design of journalism education, in journalism’s institutions and regulation as well as in its relationship to society. This practice would be characterised among other things by:

The principle of co-operation. Good conversation is about engaging listeners not simply addressing them or directing messages to them. A good conversationalist does not use language in a purely instrumental way to achieve her immediate goals. She introduces her counterparts into her world of meaning.

The distribution of speakers’ rights. No one is excluded from the conversation nor does any one speaker dominate. All are given their chance to contribute even if they do not wish to take it.

Mutual respect among speakers. Respect and courtesy is the climate of those who converse. Neither cynics nor fanatics engage in conversation: the first because they believe there is no truth and the second because they believe they have a sole monopoly.

Spontaneity and informality. Conversations have rules but they are governed by a lightness of touch and have an open and even playful character.

These characteristics are precisely those that many of the new modes of communication permit and require. But in order for this conversation to exist, for journalism to continue to hold its privileged place in democratic societies, there are some basic principles that all journalists and all citizens should seek to cultivate.

Trustworthiness and truthfulness.

Trustworthy communication is key for achieving conditions in which conversation is possible. Communication that inspires trust does so on various grounds including a presumption that it is not engaged in deception but in trying to know what is the case.

The condition *sine qua non* for all communication is a commitment to truthfulness. If lying — communicational deception — were generalized, social life would become all but impossible.

For journalism, however, the alleged truthfulness of the communicator or the communication may not be sufficient to engender trust. Trust, the reliance that we deposit in another person’s or institution’s capacity and/or disposition for carrying out or evincing certain actions and aptitudes, can be engendered by specific kinds of knowledge and experience of the source. They include practices that exhibit:

Transparency. Inviting scrutiny about one’s past or being open about one’s present and future actions and goals builds institutional and personal credibility and authority.

Accessibility. We live in information-rich times. Controlling access to information is still possible, as a number of governments show, but ultimately it little serves the purposes of establishing authoritative and high quality communication.

Accountability. Mechanisms to ensure that all those engaged in communication must respond, account for, what they communicate are a powerful means to build trust.

These three principles can provide the necessary framework in an information-rich world for not only credible but also trustworthy and truthful communication that seeks not to destroy human beings but to serve them.
In her speech to the European Parliament after her release from her kidnappers, Ingrid Betancourt affirmed her experience of the power of words and, in doing so, spoke eloquently to all contemporary communicators and citizens:

The word, you know, is of utmost importance. It is that with which we can most effectively combat hate and violence....Yes, ‘words’ have a veritable grip over the real world....the human being is a human being of the word, and the word heals, cures, brings to birth, but it can also do harm and kill. For these words that we pronounce have the force of the emotions that dwell within us.

Journalists, as one of the communities that act as keepers and mediators of the word, have a heavy responsibility in ensuring that their words truly do heal. Policymakers also have to seek to create the institutional framework that encourages journalists to behave ethically, something that UK legislators are attempting to do in the wake of the Leveson Inquiry into the culture, practice and ethics of the UK press. Finally, citizens too have it in their hands to promote ways of reporting the world that sustain and nourish, identifying victims not in order to condemn others but to improve the world we all share.

23. I. BETANCOURT, Allocution adresses al Parlement européen session du 08.10. 2008, pp.4-5. Pdf document of the speech sent to the author by Victoria Martin, journalist and now communication manager for the Socialist Group of the European Parliament. My sincerest thanks to her for making the document available to me. The original text is in French and has been translated by the author.

24. See http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/