

Tavistock Policy Seminars 'Connecting public policy and human relationships'

Emotional News: Reporting trauma and the anxious public.

Presenters: Mark Brayne and Barry Richards.

Mark began his presentation talking about the editorial impact of trauma, describing a recent article in the Guardian where a traumatised foreign correspondent had filed a report, about someone being held captive, tortured and beaten to death, in graphic detail which made the front pages but was later retracted when it turned out that although the individual had been badly beaten he was indeed alive. The correspondent had evidently been so traumatised by what he had witnessed that what he reported be believed to be true.

Mark gave another example, of the way that Bird Flu was being reported in Kosovo, that in his view was creating panic amongst the people. He suggested that a population already traumatised needed little prompting to once again fear intrusion from without. He used these as examples to illustrate that whilst journalism aims to 'tell it like it is' there is both an internal representation of 'how it is' and an external one that may both become distorted.

Mark said that emotion is of great value to journalists, in that it enables them to connect with the human aspects of what they are reporting on. He described the use of emotion in this way as being part of the toolkit of journalists, but said also that it was important to understand the role of emotion in reporting, particularly in relation to trauma.

Next Mark talked about what he described as 'Mc News' referring to Daniel Goleman's ideas about 'emotional intelligence'. He talked about 'limbic reporting', and that (limbic) part of the brain that is to do with survival, fight or flight. Mark suggested that the evolutionary advantage in checking out external events to evaluate their impact on ourselves, draws us to 'rubberneck' traumatic, violent or disturbing events. He likened this to the fatty, carbohydrate laden rush from fast food as a response to scarcity. Mark went on to say that the media play into this, with an assumption about what people are interested in, but at the expense of a balance with the more reparative, constructive and creative reporting that might follow such events, or on the more everyday things that go on in the world, what he called 'Act 2 reporting': what happens next, resilience, recovery, and the long term impact of events.

Mark ended his presentation with a slide, which was echoed in the discussion following, as he said he was a 'hack' and then a 'shrink', but is now a 'shrack or a hink' pointing to an integration, but perhaps also paradoxically illuminating the differences, between the professions of journalism and psychotherapy. Much of the discussion spoke to the difficulties of finding a space in which to think about journalism as being informative and authoritative, rather than prurient or voyeuristic, the very real difficulties and pressures

that journalists face in their task, and what can be learned from psychoanalysis that can support this.

The second presenter, Barry Richards, talked about journalism and the emotional public sphere. He said that Journalism has a crucial role to play in the 'standing fund' of anxiety within people, that can spill out into panic, disorder and dysfunction. He used a description of the kind of emotional labour undertaken by different professions in their work, and the importance of this in mediating the response from the public. Managing their emotional presence, was he thought, an important aspect of the work undertaken by journalists.

He drew our attention to two different aspects of journalism and the emotional public sphere, the first the role of reporting in politics and the second the role of journalists in reporting terror. Barry said that the adversariality and cynicism amongst the media, about politics, was contributing to a disengagement of the public. He described a bias against hope that was endemic in the reporting. He suggested that this represents a defence against the anxieties of hope, that was not only confined to the media, but that there was a particular political importance in how emotions are managed in the news. Barry went on to look at the way events after September 11th were reported, giving some analysis of the shifts in tenor of the reporting in the days following. He suggested that the containing function of the media has been weakened, and that the kinds of images used in the media contributed towards an increasing incomprehensibility of events.

Barry talked about the rise in the use of 'citizen journalism' – of the use of mobile text messaging, blogging, and digital camera's used by members of the public to capture events in the raw. Barry questioned the role of this kind of reporting in contributing to public understanding.

He said that some emotional processing of events, by journalists, allows the public to be secondary rather than primary witnesses, reducing the level of immersion in the horror of what is taking place. Barry argued that we need journalists to have this kind of emotional literacy to separate the emotional responses to what was witnessed from the 'truth' of the subject.

Discussion

The opening contribution, from a journalist, commented on Marks' presentation, saying that he had come around to the idea that journalists needed to think about emotional content. He shared his thoughts about the reporting following Hurricane Katrina, saying on the one hand the reporting had been first class, and the plight of the many people stranded without support was made public, but on the other that reporters were transmitting their own fear, which resulted in the reports of rapes, gang violence and so on, that were later found to be unsubstantiated. These he thought had a significant

impact on the relief effort, as the bus drivers had been unwilling to go in, and the emergency services prepared for a situation that wasn't accurate.

The following contribution said that both Powerpoint presentations pointed to journalists being leaders, and asked if journalists had any leadership training, or if there was any movement to support journalists in dealing with ethical and emotional issues.

A more personal account of a trauma in the family followed, telling of an intrusive press, who wished to interview the children about it, pitching it in a therapeutic light and saying that the children would regret not 'taking up the opportunity to talk'. This spoke to the question of what assumptions are made when reporting on traumatic events? The contributor pointed to a confusion about the role of journalists as societal witnesses, and asked the question: As a society do we collude with the idea that talking, after traumatic events, in this public arena is helpful? He questioned an assumption that this affords a containing function, pointing to a societal displacement, that exploits the failures of a more private containment through talking to family, friends, or priest for example.

Journalists followed this with their own experiences of knocking on doors, describing their concerns, ethical considerations, and the varying cultures within the media where some journalists, supported by their employers would go to extreme and vulgar lengths to get an interview. One journalist said 'There is something in human nature that makes people want to talk', suggesting that the 'psychopeople' in the room would understand this. Others talked of their surprise at the willingness of people to talk, or emphasised the importance of ethics, and an approach that didn't pressurise people. These contributions seemed to touch upon the confusion suggested earlier. It seemed hard to catch hold of a collaborative thinking, and a more multi-layered exploration of the emotional dimensions of reporting, rather than one dominated by more persecutory anxieties, about what role reporting plays within society, and how, as individuals, journalists contribute to this function. In attempting to delineate the emotional dimensions of reporting, there was a poignant preoccupation about what this kind of public bearing witness meant at an individual level, both for those being interviewed, and, for the interviewer.

Several journalistic contributions questioned the capacities of individuals. Can we really expect this kind of emotional labour to be the responsibility of people on the ground? Were we asking people to be superhuman to process events for the public? One contributor painted a picture of the confusion and chaos, and lack of a big picture perspective that often accompanied an assignment, where at once emotions were needed to connect with events and yet also were kept absent, to be processed at home, afterwards, when you went back to cry your eyes out.

Others likened the cycle of reporting to that of grieving, and said that as a journalist you cannot be responsible for the feelings of a nation. Perhaps it was healing for the public to see things in this way as they emerged? By 'processing' events, or undertaking the kind of emotional labour talked about by Barry, would journalists belittle the human tragedies they reported on?

There was a sense that the painful realities of undertaking this difficult job were not being heard, and that the question of journalistic ethics were rather more complex than 'how journalists behaved'. The difficulties of remaining on-top of events, and the human capacities of the journalists to do so, where at times they knew little more than those individuals with whom they were caught up in events with were talked of. Contributions spoke to the dilemma of the journalist caught up in the hierarchical, insensitive world of media tycoons, a press driven by competition, and different ethical arenas.

Those working as press officers for charities spoke to yet another image of journalism where human misery and deprivation was exploited, and victims ceased to be seen as humans and became instead cypher for the latest story. A 'trauma orgy' where gathered press would make a stampede to the most malnourished child, and a reporting which acted against a debate about other important questions and long-term issues, picking up on the importance of what Mark had described as Act 2 reporting.

Yet another image was expressed, suggesting a 'type' of personality drawn to the work. This contributor said as a reporter you were there to do a job, in a particular context, under particular circumstances, and got on with the task in hand. Vulnerability was dealt with in the bar. The serious threats to personal safety, fearing 'that knock on the door in the middle of the night', were part of the territory. Trauma was tacitly acknowledged, but the affect absent, or disconnected. Perhaps vulnerability could be ill afforded when surrounded externally by disorder and fragmentation. One speaker talked about a phone being disconnected for months, so he was unable to contact his pregnant wife. The contrast between the hopefulness and liveliness engendered in birth and impending fatherhood, and the dreadfulness of the circumstances and conditions this reporter was working in was striking.

Another contribution spoke to the difficulty within the group of bridging what was felt to be a polarisation between the therapists and the journalists, she talked about the sinking of the Kursk submarine in Russia, and what she described as the collective shame of the Russians whom she was living amongst, to the media portrayal of events. Perhaps in some way this echoed questions about the two culturally different professions, Psychoanalysis and Journalism. The contributor talked of a Russia in transition, where this tragedy, picked up by a foreign media, exposed a population grappling with questions about their cultural identity. The growing awareness of trauma within the journalistic profession, its impact both on individuals and on the way in which news is reported, is raising questions in a similar way. Were the therapists, like a foreign media, doing the exposing? One contributor expressed the sentiment that the presentations were 'shooting the messenger', suggesting an attack on the individual integrity of those undertaking this difficult work. Where did the responsibility lie? With the journalists? The media institutions? Or, with the lazy public who uncritically tuned in? Humorous references to 'Journalists Anonymous' and being 'in recovery' gave the lie to the seriousness of the work, and the events and issues being reported on, speaking to points raised in both presentations of the labour involved, and of the nature of limbic reporting.

The last contribution pointed to the striking silence of the therapists in the discussion, and wondered about the disconnection. He remarked on the assembled audience who between them had witnessed so much trauma, and yet he felt very unmoved by the discussion. He wondered if the emotional stuff had been left outside, and might as had been described, 'be sorted out later in the bar'.

The summing up from the two presenters talked about the need for a holistic approach to the work of journalists. With one of the presenters saying that whilst many reporters were robust enough to withstand the difficulties inherent in the work, others were 'sitting on a load of trauma and still hurting'. Bringing a light to bear on this aspect of the work is an important task. One of the therapists interjected with a comment about the silence of the assembled therapists. She felt that the journalists had really wanted to talk, and asked the question as to whether it was a space taken, or a space given? She said that to have rushed to interpretation would have felt to be intrusive. She remembered an interview with the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, who when asked 'Do you interpret?' replied, 'Only when I'm tired', and pointed to the importance of the space for this kind of discussion, and for what was taking place within the group.