

2.3. THE TABLOIDIZATION OF EVERYTHING

2.3.1. The Rise of *Fast-Thinking*

"[L]ike other fields, the journalistic field is based on a set of shared assumptions and beliefs, which reach beyond differences of position and opinion. These assumptions operate within a particular set of mental categories; they reside in a characteristic relationship to language, and are visible in everything implied by a formula such as 'it's just *made* for television'. These are what supplies the principle that determines what journalists select both within social reality and among symbolic production as a whole. There is no discourse (scientific analysis, political manifesto, whatever) and no action (demonstration, strike) that doesn't have to face this trial of journalistic selection in order to catch the public eye. The effect is *censorship*, which journalists practice without even being aware of it. They retain only the things capable of *interesting* them and 'keeping their attention', which means things that fit their categories and mental grid; and they reject as insignificant or remain indifferent to symbolic expressions that ought to reach the population as a whole."

(Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television*, p. 47.)

"Pushed by competition for marketshare, television networks have greater and greater recourse to the tried and true formulas of tabloid journalism, with emphasis (when not the entire newscast) devoted to human interest stories or sports. No matter what has happened in the world on a given day, more and more often the evening news begins with French soccer scores or another sporting event, interrupting the regular news. Or it will highlight the most anecdotal, ritualized political event (visits of foreign heads of state, the president's trips abroad, and so on), or the natural disasters, accidents, fires and the like. In short, the focus is on those things which are apt to arouse curiosity but require no analysis, especially in the political sphere.

"[H]uman interest stories create a political vacuum. They depoliticize and reduce what goes on in the world to the level of anecdote and scandal ... [But these stories] are nonetheless dramatized so as to 'draw a lesson' or be transformed into illustrations of 'social problems'. This is where our TV philosophers are called in to give meaning to the meaningless, anecdotal, or fortuitous event that has been artificially brought to stage center and given significance – a headscarf worn to school, an assault on a school teacher or any other 'social fact' tailor-made to arouse pathos and indignation of some commentators or the tedious moralizing of others. The same search for sensational news, and hence market success, can also lead to the selection of stories that give free rein to the unbridled constructions of demagoguery

(whether spontaneous or intentional) or can stir great excitement by catering to the most primitive drives and emotions (with stories of kidnapped children and scandals likely to arouse public indignation). Purely sentimental and therapeutic forms of mobilizing feelings can come into play, but, with murders of children or incidents tied to stigmatized groups, other forms of mobilization can also take place, forms that are just as emotional but aggressive enough almost to qualify as symbolic lynching."

(Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television*, pp. 51-2.)

"When you transmit a 'received idea', it's as if everything is set, and the problem solves itself. Communication is instantaneous because, in a sense, it has no occurred; or it only seems to have taken place. The exchange of commonplaces is communication with no content other than the fact of communication itself. The 'commonplaces' that play such an enormous role in daily conversation work because everyone can ingest them immediately. Their very banality makes them something the speaker and listener have in common ...

"If television rewards a certain number of *fast-thinkers* who offer cultural 'fast food' – predigested and prethought culture – it is not only because those who speak regularly on television are virtually on call (that, too, is tied to the sense of urgency in television news production). The list of commentators varies little (for Russia, call Mr. or Mrs. X, for Germany, it's Mr. Y). These 'authorities' spare journalists the trouble of having to look for people who really have something to say, in most cases younger, still-unknown people who are involved in their research and no much for talking to the media. These are the people who should be sought out. But the media mavens are always right on hand, set to churn out a paper or give an interview. And, of course, they are the special kind of thinkers who can 'think' in these conditions where no one else can do so."

(Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television*, pp. 29-30.)

2.3.2. The Digital Revolution, the Disaggregation of the News

"Tabloids always had the biggest reach, the largest impact, the most flexible standards. On the web, however, we are seeing the tabloidisation of everything. I don't mean this as a negative. Far from it. All news outlets need numbers in the web economy that are vastly greater than they had in an analogue world firstly to make the economics work and secondly to have an impact. The demands of web scale economics have torpedoed the local news model; they have also driven great invention and a new set of entrepreneurial skills into journalism.

"But attaining size in the world we are going into means surrendering control to the systems that deliver it. Going viral is a goal in nearly all newsrooms. The protocols and networks that deliver it were never conceived with the idea of journalism in mind...

"The most powerful trend in journalism today is full integration with reporting, presentation and distribution of journalism through the social web. The sharing and liking economy is literally changing the shape of what we do at a pace we are running to keep up with.

"Twenty years ago we had the first creaky efforts to get newspapers onto the internet at all, squeezed through copper wires and dial up modems. Fifteen years ago no one had a camera in their mobile phone, ten years ago no-one had a smartphone. Five years ago Instagram didn't exist.

"Today, the 'new newsroom' has optimisation desks, to make stories work better on social media, data scientists who analyse the information about story performance to tell journalists how to write headlines, produce photographs and report stories which will be 'liked' and 'shared' more than others. It has aggregation desks, which scour the web to find news that ordinary people have posted for a wider audience. It has audience insight desks that work on how to get more people to spend longer reading more journalism. And it has data desks, which take the newly available sources of information in vast quantities and use the latest mining tools and techniques to clean, interpret and visualise information in new ways."

(Emily Bell, "The Hugh Cudlipp Lecture" [2015].)

"One of the criticisms thus far levelled against platform companies, is that they have cherry picked the profitable parts of the publishing process and sidestepped the more expensive business of actually creating good journalism. If the current nascent experiments such as Instant Articles lead to a more integrated relationship with journalism, it is possible that we will see a more significant shift of production costs, particularly around technology and advertising sales follow.

"The reintermediation of information which once looked as though it was going to be fully democratised by the progress of the open web is likely to make the mechanisms for funding journalism get worse before they get better. Looking at the prospects for mobile advertising and the aggressive growth targets Apple, Facebook, Google et al have to meet to satisfy Wall Street, it is fair to say that unless social platforms return a great deal more money back to the source, producing news for the most part is likely to become a non-profit pursuit not an engine of capitalism.

"To be sustainable, news and journalism companies will need to radically alter their cost base. It seems most likely that the next wave of news media companies will be fashioned around a studio model of managing different stories, talents, and products across a vast range of devices and platforms. As this shift happens then posting journalism directly to Facebook or other platforms will become the rule rather than the exception. Even maintaining a website could be abandoned in favour of hyper distribution. The distinction between platforms and publishers will melt completely."

(Emily Bell, "The End of the News As We Know It" [2016].)

2.3.3. The Disintegration of the Public

"Ironically, in a world in which we have countless tools to connect, we are also watching fragmentation, polarization, and de-diversification happen en masse. The American public is self-segregating, and this is tearing at the social fabric of the country.

"Many in the tech world imagined that the Internet would connect people in unprecedented ways, allow for divisions to be bridged and wounds to heal. It was the kumbaya dream. Today, those same dreamers find it quite unsettling to watch as the tools that were designed to bring people together are used by people to magnify divisions and undermine social solidarity. These tools were built in a bubble, and that bubble has burst.

"Nowhere is this more acute than with Facebook ...

"Many pundits remarked that, during the 2016 election season, very few Americans were regularly exposed to people whose political ideology conflicted with their own. This is true. But it cannot be fixed by Facebook or news media. Exposing people to content that challenges their perspective doesn't actually make them more empathetic to those values and perspectives. To the contrary, it polarizes them. What makes people willing to hear difference is knowing and trusting people whose worldview differs from their own. Exposure to content cannot make up for self-segregation.

"If we want to develop a healthy democracy, we need a diverse and highly connected social fabric. This requires creating contexts in which the American public voluntarily struggles with the challenges of diversity to build bonds that will last a lifetime. We have been systematically undoing this, and the public has used new technological advances to make their lives easier by self-segregating. This has increased polarization, and we're going to pay a heavy price for this going forward. Rather than

focusing on what media enterprises can and should do, we need to focus instead on building new infrastructures for connection where people have a purpose for coming together across divisions. We need that social infrastructure just as much as we need bridges and roads.

(dana boyd, "Why American is Self-Segregating" [2017].)

2.3.4. The Cost of the Spectacle

"The media is supposed to be a check to power, but, for years now, it has basked in becoming power in its own right. What worries me right now is that, as it continues to report out the spectacle, it has no structure for self-reflection, for understanding its weaknesses, its potential for manipulation.

"The media industry needs to take responsibility for its role in producing spectacle for selfish purposes. There is a reason that the public doesn't trust institutions in this country. And what the media has chosen to do is far from producing information. It has chosen to produce anxiety in the hopes that we will obsessively come back for more. That is unhealthy. And it's making us an unhealthy country.

"Spectacle has a cost. It always has. And we are about to see what that cost will be."

(dana boyd, "Reality Check: I Blame the Media" [2016].)

2.3.5. Digital Capitalism, Platform Capitalism

"The problem is not fake news but the speed and ease of its dissemination, and it exists primarily because today's digital capitalism makes it extremely profitable – look at Google and Facebook – to produce and circulate false but click-worthy narratives."

(Evgeny Morozov, "Moral Panic Over Fake News Hides the Real Enemy" [2017].)

"[I]n the twenty-first century advanced capitalism came to be centred upon extracting and using a particular kind of raw material: data ... Simply put, we should consider *data* to be the raw material that must be extracted, and the *activities* of users to be the natural source of this raw material."

"[P]latforms are digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact. They therefore position themselves as intermediaries that bring together different users: customers, advertisers, service providers, producers, suppliers, and even physical objects ... [D]igital platforms produce and are reliant on 'network effects': the more numerous the users who use a platform, the more valuable that platform becomes for everyone else ... But this generates a cycle whereby more users begets more users, which leads to platforms having a natural tendency toward *monopolisation*."

(Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, pp. 39-45.)

3.1. THE MORAL LIFE IN A MEDIA-SATURATED AGE

3.1.1. The End of Communication

Language and action, means and ends are bound inseparably in the practice of Christian theology, as explored brilliantly in the work of Dominican theologian and philosopher Herbert McCabe:

"Instead of saying that I have a private mind and a public body, a mind for having concepts in and a body for saying and hearing words, I say that I have a body that is able to be with other bodies not merely by physical contact but by linguistic communication. Having a soul is just being able to communicate; having a mind is being able to communicate linguistically."

(McCabe, *What is Ethics About?*, p. 86)

McCabe importantly argues that "the human body is intrinsically communicative ... It does not simply produce other bodies which are its children in its own image, it produces *itself* at least to the extent of creating the media, the language and communication systems which are an extension of itself." (McCabe, p. 91) Ethics, for McCabe, "is just the study of human behaviour in so far as it is a piece of communication." (p. 92) McCabe, following Aquinas thus collapses the Cartesian distinction – which remains so much with us today in its various voluntarist and individualist guises – between the private self/mind (what Descartes called the *res cognitans*) and the public or willing agent (the *res extensa*).

"Ethics is traditionally and almost universally supposed to be concerned with the difference between right and wrong, between good and bad behaviour. This is, however, a mistake: the same kind of mistake as thinking that literary criticism is concerned with the difference between good and bad poems ... Its purpose is to enable us to enjoy the poems more by responding to them more sensitively, by entering more deeply into their significance ... Now the purpose of ethics is similarly to enable us to enjoy life more by responding to it more sensitively, by entering into the significance of human action." (McCabe, p. 95)

McCabe uses an analogy here which, for reasons that should be obvious, is of immense interest to me:

"A shallow cliché-ridden piece of journalese is a piece of faded language; the linguistic intensity has slackened, the texture of meaning as worn thin. In a piece of bad writing a man has not lived into his medium, you get no sense of vigorous presence. Now what the literary judgement is to writing, the ethical judgement is to the whole complex field of human communication. In some activities a man has not lived into his medium, his action has made at some superficial level of meaning but it does not make full human sense." (McCabe, p. 100)

This cannot help but inflect and shape the nature of theological language itself. "Self-expression is almost the exact opposite of self-assertion. The latter substitutes domination for communication. Through fear of becoming vulnerable to others by opening ourselves to them in communication, we seek to control them so that they fit into our own world." (p. 101) And against the temptation – indeed, the counterpart to domination – simply to assert a certain autonomy or wilful remove from the claims of others, McCabe later insists that the Christian "is not concerned to extend the areas of an autonomy which in the end means irresponsibility, but to transform media of domination into media of communication, media of self-assertion into media of self-expression" (pp. 158-59).

All of this rests, however, on a strong theological claim about what lay behind the very act of communication itself. This has been well explored by Oliver O'Donovan:

"'Communication' is the readiness to assert a private interest only to the extent that it can become a common interest. Its logic can be summed up in the phrase: 'what is "mine" is "ours"' - not 'what is "mine" is "yours"' (which is the logic of bestowal), nor 'this 'mine' is yours, and this 'yours' is mine' (which is the logic of exchange). These logics have their place within the broader logic of communication, but are secondary to it. The private interest must first be located within the common interest, the 'I' find its context within the 'we'."

(Oliver O'Donovan, "The 'Common Good'.")

This all depends on God's original act of communication which overcomes any dichotomy between the "good in itself" and the "good for us":

"our communications find their origin in God's self-communication, and are therefore open to a radically greater communication than they achieve ... Communicating the goods of creation with each other, we discover a radical equality with one another in our creaturely relation to God. None of us is the *source* of a communication to others, for we hold what we communicate from Christ. The good, then ... is *already* a communication, even as it is good 'in itself' ... [Thus] the

authority of the common good lies in the *self-communicative* character of the good as such, which cannot be known as 'good in itself' without being, in some sense, 'good for us' too, a claim on our practical interest that we cannot refuse."

3.1.2. The Art of Disagreement

"One of the major problems, especially in our media-conscious age, is that we talk past each other and in each other's absence; and even when we speak face to face, it is often in a 'lock' of mutual suspicion and deep anxiety. But the Body of Christ requires more than this. It requires ... staying alongside: which implies that the most profound service we can do for each other is to point to Christ; to turn from our confrontation in silence to the Christ we all try to look at; to say to one another, from time to time, hopefully and gently, 'Do you see that? This is how I see him: can you see too?'"

(Rowan Williams, "Making Moral Decisions," p. 14.)

"The rational making of decisions in everyday life has to be undertaken for the most part in milieus in which individuals and groups are exposed by the technologies of the mass media to too much information or too many different types of doubtful provenance, often misleadingly abbreviated, and designed in any case to arouse short-term interest or excitement that can easily be displaced by the next targeted stimulus ... The rhetorical modes of rational enquiry and discussion are deeply incompatible with the rhetorical modes of the dominant political and commercial culture. And we cannot confront this incompatibility and the conflicts it generates, and the goods that it threatens, without rethinking even further some well-established notions of freedom of expression and toleration."

(Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Goods of Conflict")

3.1.3. The Practice of Nonviolence

"We are living under a tyranny of untruth which confirms itself in power and establishes more and more total control over men in proportion as they convince themselves they are resisting error ... The basic falsehood is the lie that we are totally dedicated to truth, and that we can remain dedicated to truth in a manner that is at the same time honest and exclusive: that we have the monopoly of all truth, just as our adversary of the moment has the monopoly of all error ...

"If we really sought truth we would begin slowly and laboriously to divest ourselves one by one of all our coverings of fiction and delusion ... In the long run, no one can show another the error that is within him, unless the other is convinced that his critic first sees and loves the good that is within him. So while we are perfectly willing to tell our adversary he is wrong, we will never be able to do so effectively until we can ourselves appreciate where he is right. And we can never accept this judgment on our errors until he gives evidence that he really appreciates our own peculiar truth. Love, love only, love of our deluded fellow man as he actually is, in his delusion and in his sin: this alone can open the door to truth."

(Thomas Merton, "Truth and Violence," pp. 62-3.)

"The basis of pharisaism is division ..." – presumption of unity.

"The evangelical zeal which is demanded of the Christian should make it impossible for him to generalize about 'the wicked' against whom he takes up moral arms in a struggle for righteousness."

"The realism of nonviolence must be made evident by humility and self-restraint which clearly show frankness and open-mindedness and invite the adversary to serious and reasonable discussion."

"The test of our sincerity in the practice of nonviolence is this: are we willing to *learn something from the adversary?*"

(Thomas Merton, "Blessed are the Meek.")

3.1.4. Nurturing the Imagination (or, the non-ubiquity of the political)

3.1.5. The Virtue of Not Knowing

"The greatest need of our time is to clean out the enormous mass of mental and emotional rubbish that clutters our minds and makes of all political and social life a mass illness. Without this housecleaning we cannot begin to *see*. Unless we *see* we cannot think. The purification must begin with the mass media. How?"

(Thomas Merton, "Truth and Violence," p. 72.)

"Consider the way in which we read our daily newspaper. For each of us, it probably contains some item of real interest, but how few of us are capable, after we have satisfied our genuine curiosity, of throwing the paper away. We go on reading without real interest or pleasure because we are too lazy to stop."

"We are prepared to recognize that, while a desire for food or sex is in itself natural and good, and uncontrolled indulgence of either is not, we can hardly tolerate the notion that the same is true of all forms of curiosity from the most vulgar to the most intellectual ... This moral blind spot exists at every social and educational level. The scholar who looks down his nose at the multitude reading their newspaper reports of crimes and personal disasters is proud of having unearthed and edited and published the intimate papers of a dead writer, and his scientific colleague, who thinks much literary curiosity frivolous, see nothing questionable in his own attempts to discover a nerve gas against which no defence is possible."

(W.H. Auden, "Do You Know Too Much?," pp. 438-9.)

In his extraordinary reflection on the figure of Iago in Shakespeare's *Othello*, Auden remarks on Iago's insatiable, irresponsible desire to *know*:

"What makes it impossible for us to condemn him self-righteously is that, in our culture, we have all accepted the notion that the right to know is absolute and unlimited. The gossip column is one side of the medal; the cobalt bomb the other. We are quite prepared to admit that, while food and sex are good in themselves, an uncontrolled pursuit of either is not, but it is difficult for us to believe that intellectual curiosity is a desire like any other, and to realize that correct knowledge and truth are not identical. To apply a categorical imperative to knowing, so that, instead of asking, 'What can I know?' we ask, 'What, at this moment, am I meant to know?' - to entertain the possibility that the only knowledge which can be true for us is the knowledge we can live up to - that seems to all of us crazy and almost immoral. But, in that case, who are we to say to Iago - 'No, you mustn't'."

(W.H. Auden, "The Joker in the Pack" in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose, Volume IV, 1956-1962*, ed. Edward Mendelson [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010], pp. 624-43.)

3.1.6. The Custodianship of the Eyes

"If you open any old book of asceticism, any book which teaches you how to meditate, how to live in the presence of God ... the *custodia oculorum*, the guarding of the eye, is always a major chapter ... When [the Greek Christian Fathers] spoke of the *custodia oculorum*, they referred to the constant awareness that I can train my eyes, as I can train my hands, to repeat the right look onto the right object which I have chosen to model, and which I want to interiorize. Like hospitality or any other virtue, the good gaze develops through practice ..."

(Ivan Illich, *The Rivers North of the Future*, pp. 108-109.)

"The moral life ... is something that goes on continually, not something that is switched off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices. What happens in between such choices is indeed what is crucial."

"The task of attention goes on all the time and at apparently empty and everyday moments we are 'looking', making those little peering efforts of imagination which have such important cumulative results."

"... the concepts of knowledge, truth, justice and moral passion are internally bound together. Knowledge informs the moral quality of the world, the selfish and self-interestedly casual or callous man *sees* a different world from that which the careful scrupulous benevolent man sees ..."

(Iris Murdoch, from *The Sovereignty of the Good and Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*.)

3.1.7. Read Less, but Pay for What You Read