COMPASSION, MORALITY
AND THE MEDIA

Keith Tester
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Writing in the London Review of Books at the time of the Falkland/Malvinas Islands conflict, Raymond Williams argued that underlying the familiar issues which arise when news reports are being examined, such as ‘issues of control and independence; of the quality of reporting; of access and balance in discussion,’ was a deeper problematic. In order to describe it, he coined the phrase ‘the culture of distance’. Reminding us that the televisual picture of the world is, of course, a selective one, he pointed out that ‘what is much more significant is the revealed distance between the technology of television, as professionally understood, managed and interpreted, and the political and cultural space within which it actually operates’. It is across this distance, he observed, that the tragic devastation endemic to warfare is recurrently taken-up and re-inflected by television news into an ‘antiseptic’ presentation of reality. Hence his urgent call for new investigations to be made into this culture of distance, this ‘latent culture of alienation, within which men and women are reduced to models, figures and the quick cry in the throat’.

In the spirit of this type of intervention, Keith Tester’s Compassion, Morality and the Media constitutes an important engagement with current debates about the ethical implications engendered by media portrayals of the distant suffering of others. It takes as its point of departure into these debates the issue of ‘compassion fatigue’, a modern syndrome frequently attributed to media audiences ostensibly overwhelmed by the sheer volume of reports concerning human tragedies from around the globe. The cumulative effects of such reports, it is claimed, work to psychologically numb audience members into ceasing to care anymore, thereby undermining their
capacity to get involved and lend assistance. Tester proceeds to unravel the precepts informing this compassion fatigue thesis, firstly through a careful explication of the relevant kinds of ethical judgements being made routinely by journalists. Next, his attention turns to the audience members themselves, where he suggests that ‘compassion is only identifiable as morality as and when it is the basis of distinctive forms of social action on the part of the actors who together constitute the audience’. Subsequent chapters elaborate upon this line of enquiry into the ‘moral horizons of audiences’, exploring related topics as diverse as the photographs used in charitable appeals, the impact of 24 hour rolling news or the so-called ‘CNN Effect’, and broadcast telethons, amongst others. In each instance, Tester shows that however bored and apathetic we might be at times, sometimes something happens which ‘stirs us out of stupor and inspires us to take part in events’. Examining the complexities, and lived contradictions, of compassion is thus shown to be of vital significance for furthering our understanding of the everyday experience of media culture.

The Issues in Cultural and Media Studies series aims to facilitate a diverse range of critical investigations into pressing questions considered to be central to current thinking and research. In light of the remarkable speed at which the conceptual agendas of cultural and media studies are changing, the authors are committed to contributing to what is an ongoing process of re-evaluation and critique. Each of the books is intended to provide a lively, innovative and comprehensive introduction to a specific topical issue from a fresh perspective. The reader is offered a thorough grounding in the most salient debates indicative of the book’s subject, as well as important insights into how new modes of enquiry may be established for future explorations. Taken as a whole, then, the series is designed to cover the core components of cultural and media studies courses in an imaginatively distinctive and engaging manner.

Stuart Allan
We have all had the experience of reading a newspaper or watching the television and of being deeply moved by some of the horrors we read about or see, some of the suffering and misery which other people are forced to experience through no fault of their own. Why do these reports and representations move us? How do they move us? And what are we likely to do about it? Do you feel upset when you see a tortured baby? Do you shrug without a care and blame them for living in such stupid places when you read or hear about flood victims in Africa? Do you think that some people are simply fated to suffer and that there is nothing to be done about it? Do you take part in telethon appeals? Why?

These are the questions which this book seeks to explore and examine.

It seems to me to be curious that although we all watch television and read newspapers (or at least, the vast majority of us do those things), and although we are all therefore aware of the problem of what the suffering on the screen or the page might mean to us, this whole series of questions has received virtually no sustained academic attention. There are a few books and articles which are relevant to the matter but, so far as I can discover, nothing that deals with the problem of the suffering and misery of distant others in anything approaching a developed and focused way. The honourable exception is Luc Boltanski’s Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics (Boltanski 1999). I would hope that anyone who wishes to pursue the debates which are raised in this book (if only to take issue with them) will pay Boltanski’s book the serious attention it deserves.

The book feels its way into the question of the moral compulsion of the media through a detailed consideration of the theme of compassion fatigue.
A very short Chapter 1 seeks to establish parameters within which it is possible for us to think about all of these issues, by comparing and contrasting the arguments of social thinkers on the one hand and journalists on the other. Chapters 2 and 3 concentrate on different aspects of the compassion fatigue issue; Chapter 2 on compassion fatigue and journalistic production and Chapter 3 on compassion fatigue and the moral horizons of the audience. In particular, Chapter 3 examines the possibility that men and women might experience compassion in very different ways. Meanwhile, Chapters 4 and 5 follow through on the widespread belief that there is nothing we can do about all the suffering and misery in the world. The interesting point is that the people who say that there is nothing to be done are also likely to get involved in telethon appeals in order to do something. In other words, there seems to be a gap between what people think and what they do. Chapter 4 examines how media texts might spur the compassion of the audience and Chapter 5 looks at the kinds of moral action that might ensue.

I ought to make it clear that throughout the discussion I am not seeking to ‘take sides’ in the debate about whether or not compassion fatigue actually ‘exists’. Although my own views on compassion will probably become clear as the book proceeds, and although I think that the whole debate about compassion fatigue has a number of significant logical problems (not least: what is the ‘normal’ level of compassion that is presumably being fatigued?), I use compassion fatigue as a way into a series of debates rather than as something to be analysed on its own terms. That is why I frequently refer to the compassion fatigue thesis.

I hope that this is a book that will be used as a kind of invitation to a series of possible debates rather than as the statement of a position. This is a book of questions, not answers. The answers are for you to provide. I hope that this book will be treated as a source of themes and debates to be explored and assessed by reference to the coverage of the ever lengthening catalogue of the misery of the people of the world. I hope that this book will be used as a partner with which to think and work. It should not be treated as a text merely to be read.

In order to encourage you to work with this book, and to construct its relevance for yourself, I have chosen not to include pictures or a lot of background information about some of the incidents to which I refer. This is for a couple of reasons. First, I have always thought that one sure way of making a book date really quickly is to include photographs which are amazingly contemporary when the text is sent to the publisher and astonishingly old hat when the book finally appears. This problem also surrounds historical events; what seems to me to be important today might not seem to be so pressing tomorrow. In any case, if I have referred to a historical event
which continues to be pressing but is shrouded in mystery, that forgetting of the circumstances of its emergence (and instead its ‘naturalization’) is precisely one of the questions which the book wants to examine. Second, I have not included pictures because, as I said before, I would like this to be a book which is used and, therefore, I think it is more valuable for everyone if you gather illustrative material for yourself, in terms of your own media reading and viewing, in terms of your own feelings of compassion.

I would like to thank Stuart Allan and Justin Vaughan for thinking that I was up to the task of writing this book. I hope I have gone some little way towards repaying their trust. I would also like to thank Linda Rutherford and Madeleine Tester, Jo Moneyn and Graham Spencer for their help. I am to blame for everything between these covers.
Introduction

It is useful to set up the parameters within which the rest of this book will operate. This can be achieved if we spend a little time considering two different approaches to the issue and the question of how the media might – or might not – be morally compelling. The first parameter can be established by a couple of theoretical statements about the moral compulsion of the media. These are statements which can be found in the work of two of the most sophisticated social thinkers of the present, Alain Finkielkraut and Zygmunt Bauman. The second parameter is provided by statements which have been made by a couple of journalists reflecting on the moral relevance of their profession and, perhaps more interestingly, the gap between what they intended the audience to see and hear and what the audience evidently did see and hear.

Theoretical insights

In what is, admittedly, a slightly obscure reference (a footnote to the main text of his denunciation of Holocaust revisionism), the French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut writes that when it comes to the problem of world hunger, we are in a different situation from our ancestors because we do not have the defence of ignorance. Whereas our ancestors could claim, probably in all good conscience, that they did nothing about famine in Africa or slaughter in Asia because they knew nothing about it, we cannot develop that kind of argument without lying to ourselves. We know, we know we
know and everybody else knows that we know (this is a problem which is
dealt with in the context of Western responses to the war in the Balkans in
Cushman and Mestrovic 1996).

For Finkielkraut, ‘public indifference can no longer be attributed to igno-
rance as it once could’ (Finkielkraut 1998: 141). This means that it is impos-
sible to uphold ideals about the essential moral goodness of humanity and of
individual people. After all, if we were good and kindly as some Enlighten-
ment moral narratives suggest, we would not be able to know about the
famines with such equanimity. But we do know and we do not feel ourselves
to be overly stirred into action. Consequently, Finkielkraut felt that it was
appropriate to make the general statement that, ‘The more suffering that
people see on their TV screens, the less concerned they feel. Current events
demobilize them; images kill the feeling of obligation within them’. He went
on to claim that, ‘The public is blasé: news reports fail to take their audience
beyond the realm of everyday experience, and they insinuate the most mon-
strous realities into the everyday by marking them with the stamp of deja-
vu’ (Finkielkraut 1998: 141). In all, Finkielkraut believes that, ‘public
indifference is now the result of habit’ and that, ‘In order to break public
opinion of this habit, one is almost naturally led to up the ante. Famine
attains the status of genocide, and the West’s responsibility for the Third
World’s delayed development becomes the West’s extermination of Third
World peoples’ (Finkielkraut 1998: 141, original emphasis. Finkielkraut’s
book was originally published in France in 1982. It is therefore worth read-
ing alongside some of the points that are made in Baudrillard 1994. Baud-
rillard’s book was first published in France in 1992).

A comparable position has been hinted at by Zygmunt Bauman in a
couple of sentences that are not really developed in his book Postmodern
Ethics (Bauman 1993). There, he mentions an idea of the telecity which
draws on the Simmelian theme of the status of the stranger in the modern
metropolis (see the essay on ‘The Stranger’ in Simmel 1950). According to
Simmel, of course, the stranger who is perpetually encountered in the spaces
and places of the metropolis tends to be dealt with through strategies of
avoidance and disengagement. For Simmel, precisely because the stranger is
unknown, the individual attempts to make sense of this mysterious presence
by a turning away from social relationships. Bauman follows this lead when
he says that strangers are now also represented by television and that yet, in
that representation, they lose their embodied presence and in so doing they
lose their moral integrity. They become something other than fully and ex-
perientially properly human. He says that, ‘The strangers (the surfaces of
strangers) whom the televiwer confronts are “telemiated”. There is,
comfortingly, a glass screen to which their lives are confined’. Bauman goes
on: ‘the reduction of their existential mode to pure surface is now, at long last, tangibly obvious, indubitable, technologically guaranteed’ (Bauman 1993: 177–8). Television thus achieves what the city could not. Whereas the stranger in the city retains and remains a physical and material presence, according to Bauman the stranger in the telecity is flattened out so that her or his presence to the viewer is without any great substance.

It is clear from the tone of the passages from Bauman that, for him, the telecity (the television as the agent of the imagination of a universal city of strangers) is of enormous consequence for moral relationships and ties between the viewers and the people on the screen. This is obvious from his comment about strangers become surfaces. The inhabitants of his telecity are disembodied and disindividuated; instead they are aestheticized (they are represented as surfaces) that are denied a moral compulsion precisely because they lack any deep integrity or objectivity. For Bauman then, the telecity symbolizes the replacement of the moral by the aesthetic to such an extent that it becomes reasonable to question whether it remains valid to talk about morality in this particular field.

But when he reaches that kind of conclusion, Bauman turns the debate about the compulsion of television for moral relationships to the discourse of pleasure. As he puts it: ‘In the telecity, the others appear solely as objects of enjoyment, no strings attached . . . Offering amusement is their only right to exist – and a right which it is up to them to confirm ever anew, with each successive “switching on” ’ (Bauman 1993: 178). As such, even though Bauman gestures towards crucially important themes and concerns, his own treatment of the relationship between television and morality ultimately turns away from the problem of moral relationships. Of course, for Bauman, that is exactly the issue at hand; the seemingly decisive conquest of the moral by the aesthetic, of responsibility by fun.

What is clear, however, is the point of connection between Bauman and Alain Finkielkraut. They both assume that the suffering other will be overwhelmingly morally compelling to any and every audience only insofar as that other is possessed of a material solidity. When that solidity is absent – as it necessarily must be when the other is present only through representation – moral status is thrown into doubt and there emerges for the audience the pressing problem of what this means. Doubt and uncertainty replace the certainty and confidence which would presumably prevail when and where the other is possessed of a material dimension and integrity. For Finkielkraut the result is that the audience is thrown back into its habitual modes of viewing when it is confronted with uncertainty, while for Bauman the result is that the audience demands to be entertained and amused if the others are going to be able to command anything approaching a second
glance or thought (and even then, that ability is dependent upon there being nothing more entertaining on another channel or on the next page).

Yet in subsequent comments, Bauman has put a question mark against the ability of representations and reports of suffering and misery to be entertaining even on their own limited terms. He has done this by emphasizing the problem of global poverty (and therefore the comparison and connection of Bauman with Finkielkraut is given more validity) and by drawing on some comments by the Polish commentator Ryszard Kapuscinski. He points to three areas of concern.

First, Bauman says that it is no coincidence that reports of famines come from those parts of the world which we also tend to associate with the once rapidly growing economies of the ‘Asian tigers’. According to Bauman, the audience is left to reach the conclusion that starvation and misery are not inevitable in any part of the world and, therefore, that the suffering must be the fault of the victims in some mysterious yet no doubt decisive manner. The success stories of some Asian economies ‘are assumed to demonstrate what was to be proved – that the sorry plight of the hungry and indolent is their sui generis choice: alternatives are available, and within reach – but not taken for the lack of industry or resolve’. He concludes that, ‘the underlying message is that the poor themselves bear responsibility for their fate’ (Bauman 1998a: 73). What this comment seems to miss, however, is the fact that many reports of famine come from Africa. But the general thrust of Bauman’s comment remains valid. Africa is invariably presented as a place of endemic and persistent pain and suffering. Therefore, instead of poverty being the fault of the victims, the message is that it is simply the way that things are. It becomes their unalterable fate.

Second, ‘the news is so scripted and edited as to reduce the problem of poverty and deprivation to the question of hunger alone’ (Bauman 1998a: 73). The point here is that, for Bauman and Kapuscinski alike, the reduction of poverty to hunger represents a gross oversimplification of a complex and multidimensional condition. For them both, poverty is about much more than hunger and starvation and to pretend otherwise is to reduce the issue of global poverty to a straightforward issue which needs to be addressed only when the problem arises. In other words, Western audiences are able to forget about whole swathes of the world so long as they are not seen or known to be experiencing famine. This is because the equation of poverty with hunger means that where there is not hunger neither can there be poverty.

Third, Bauman uses Kapuscinski to suggest that the media coverage of famine, misery and suffering serves to isolate the world of the audience from the world in which it seems that violence and brutality run amok. He says
that the media create the world ‘out there’ as a problem from which the world ‘in here’ has to be isolated and kept apart. Consequently, ‘A synthetic image of the self-inflicted brutality sediments in public consciousness – an image of... an alien, subhuman world beyond ethics and beyond salvation’. Bauman says that this ‘synthetic image’ allows audiences to believe that, ‘Attempts to save that world from the worst consequences of its own brutality may bring only momentary effects and are bound in the long run to fail’. The reports and representations teach that the world ‘out there’ is literally and metaphorically hopeless. Indeed, Bauman says that for the audience, the major problem becomes one of how to make sure that the prosecutors of brutality are kept firmly in the ‘out there’ that is marked by violence and want, in contradistinction to the ‘in here’ which is purportedly marked by ethics and hope (Bauman 1998: 75–6).

From Finkielkraut and Bauman the conclusion seems to be obvious. There might not be anything which will be able to snap the audience out of its deep and well-learned torpor and boredom, and some of the scenes might be so commonplace that they are scarcely noticed. The implication seems to be that nothing terribly much matters, and nothing matters of its own account, on its own terms.

The intentions of journalists

News producers also know that whatever story they are covering cannot be accorded any status of being absolutely important to the exclusion of everything else (indeed, even if a story is the most important thing that has happened today and even if all news broadcasts are dedicated to it, there is no reason to assume that it will be that significant tomorrow), and they also know that the pressures of time mean that their report will have to draw on a repertoire of stock images and linguistic devices if it is going to be able to make any sense to the audience. The world becomes known through shorthand and the audience know the key to that code only through repetition and more or less enforced learning. Moreover, it is rare for television journalists to be allocated the time they feel that they need in order to adequately report the complexities of any given situation; even when they are given time, the consequences are not necessarily what they intended.

In this respect, a salutary tale has been told by George Alagiah, the former BBC Africa correspondent. He has spoken about two reports he filed from the famine zones of Sudan in 1998. The first report was a fairly conventional piece which told how the famine was hitting the small town of Tonj. It included all of the usual images of hunger and starvation that audiences have
come to depend upon if they are going to be able to recognize a famine. Personally I cannot recall either of Alagiah’s reports, but I am happy to wager that this first report included pictures of babies suckling at the empty breasts of their mothers, toddlers with flies around their eyes and, quite probably, a picture of two naked children aged about 8 or 9 walking along a dusty track. The report probably included as well pictures of the overwhelmed famine relief facilities. The second report was broadcast the following night. Alagiah thought that the second report was much more challenging than the first of his abilities as a broadcast journalist, and it attempted to contextualize the earlier report of the famine. This second report included interviews with key players from the area, and it is clear that Alagiah is immensely proud of what he filed. Both reports were allocated three minutes of air time.

Now, Alagiah intended the two reports to fit together, with the latter giving the depth and context to the former. But this is not what happened. Certainly, the BBC broadcast the reports as intended, but: ‘Ask anyone in our newsroom which piece they remember and they will tell you it is the first, with its harrowing pictures of a famine at work’. Evidently, the wider audience reacted in the same way. Alagiah says that he received a number of letters after the two reports and that, ‘Most people remember feeling sorry for the poor souls of southern Sudan but not many can recall being told how the people there had reached that sorry state’ (Alagiah 1999: 5).

Alagiah believes that his job has a certain moral significance. He establishes that significance on the need to defend human rights in a world which disregards them all too easily. He says that, ‘the reason we need to take action on behalf of the people of Kosovo and Sudan is that, in both cases, human rights are being trampled’. For Alagiah: ‘The defence of human rights is a principle. It is an absolute’ (Alagiah 1999: 5). Notice how, in those passages, Alagiah draws a causal connection between his ability as a journalist to report and to bring home the realities of the destruction of ‘human rights’ and action that is taken by audiences on behalf of those who are so suffering. Alagiah wants his audiences to do something on the basis of what he reports, and his problem is that the audiences might well do nothing at all or, alternatively, that they might not do what he intended. Alagiah wants political mobilization and outrage. He wants a commitment on the part of media audiences to alleviate and to deplore the suffering that is brought home to them. But this is not what Alagiah sees around him. What he sees instead is little more than sympathy. He says that, ‘I am the last person to deride the emotional response that viewers had to some of my reports, but the danger of feeling sorry for someone is that it can be a somewhat ephemeral reaction. It lasts only until some other tragedy eclipses it’. He does not just want people to care. He wants them to care, ‘for the right
reasons’ (Alagiah 1999: 5; the problem of the transience of sympathy and compassion is a theme that I tackle in Tester 1997).

An argument for the moral relevance and importance of the broadcast report has also been made by the former BBC war correspondent, Martin Bell. Writing after the war in the Balkans of the early and mid-1990s, Bell expressed his belief that, ‘journalism - not only in the war zones and amid human suffering, but perhaps especially there - is not a neutral and mechanical undertaking but in some sense a moral enterprise’. He said that journalism ‘must be informed by an idea of right and wrong. It operates frequently on morally dangerous ground. It makes a difference’ (Bell 1998: 18). And Bell could give examples from the Balkans war of the difference that television can make. He says that prisoner exchanges would not have happened without the presence of television as some kind of guarantor of the honour of both sides, and he believes that war crimes are harder to perpetrate when the aggressors know that journalists might uncover what they have done (unfortunately, such a possibility did not unduly slow the deeds of Serbian militia).

What Bell is calling for is a morally serious and engaged form of journalism. He calls this a journalism of attachment and distinguishes it from what he calls bystander’s journalism. Bystander’s journalism is the tradition in which Bell was trained at the BBC. In the context of war reporting, this kind of journalism focuses on the events as they unfold and on military tactics rather than upon ‘the people who provoke them, the people who fight them and the people who suffer from them’. Meanwhile, the journalism of attachment is ‘a journalism that cares as well as knows; that is aware of its responsibilities; that will not stand neutrally between good and evil, right and wrong, the victim and the oppressor’. A powerful expression of Bell’s journalism of attachment was provided by the press journalist Ed Vulliamy, who covered the Balkans war for The Guardian. He once asked: ‘What the hell was so confusing or complicated about concentration camps or kids being blown to bits by mortar bombs? What was the problem about whose “side” to be on: the children or the bombers?’ (Vulliamy 1997; see also Vulliamy 1994). According to Bell this kind of journalism is all the more necessary because ‘we in the press, and especially in television, which is its most powerful division, do not stand apart from the world. We are part of it. We exercise a certain influence, and we have to know that. The influence may be for better or for worse, and we have to know that too’ (Bell 1998: 16; see also Bell 1996a).

Once again, it is worth noting that, just like George Alagiah, Martin Bell believes that there is a connection between the reports he and his colleagues file and the action that ensues on the part of the audience. Bell is sure that
journalists exercise ‘certain influence’ and so he too is assuming that the audience (among other constituencies), acts in terms of the extent to which he is successful in showing the evil and the wrong. But Vulliamy is not so sure. He seems to be extremely aware that all of his efforts did not really cause too much audience action and he wonders about the kind of people we seem to have become: ‘We shoved all this stuff into the face of homosupposedly-sapiens as it was happening in 1992’ (Vulliamy 1997). And the horrors of that war still went on, without any mobilization of outrage, indeed with relatively few expressions of outrage (few relative to the enormity of what we all knew was happening – concentration camps, rape centres, torture and the rest).

These journalists are agreed that there is a moral component to what it is that they do. They are all agreed that they are professionally and humanly motivated by what might be called a ‘journalistic conscience’ in which ‘the journalist, insofar as he or she is a human being, must strive to alleviate suffering’ (Schroth 1995: 45). Alagiah wants to file reports which respect human rights, and which encourage the audience to do likewise. Martin Bell advocates a journalism which knows when it is important to stop being ‘objective’ and when, instead, it is important to reveal evil and express repugnance and outrage. Ed Vulliamy advocates a passionate journalism that knows what is wrong and which refuses to allow the audience to maintain that it did not know what was happening. For all three of them, the report is assumed to be morally compelling, and their words are riddled with a sense of anxiety that they might not succeed in getting the point over with enough power and clarity, with guilt that they have failed adequately to reflect what they have seen and with dismay that audiences evidently can bear to know all of this and still do very little about it.

There is then a gulf between the moral intentionality of journalists and the moral action that audiences carry out on the basis of what those journalists have reported. For example, Alagiah wants unflinching and non-negotiable respect for human rights in a way which will cause media audiences to spot abuse wherever it happens and to protest against it. But he is aware that this is not at all what his audiences seem to do. Instead of adopting a rigorous ethical stance, his viewers and listeners instead become possessed of a more or less temporary sympathy which will likely dissipate into thin air as soon as the next problem comes along.

Conclusion

The point I am wanting to make is that reports of the suffering of distant others are morally meaningful to audiences in a way that is much more
complex and confusing than journalists intend. Their meanings also seem to be much more complex than the existing social theories which deal with the matter seem to be able to accommodate. On the one hand, journalists see their productions spinning out of their control and, on the other hand, audiences can sometimes be much more active and questioning than the general theoretical statements which are made by Finkielkraut and Bauman would lead us to expect.

It is precisely this complexity which any detailed consideration of the relationship between compassion, morality and the media has to be able to contain and explain. The remainder of this book offers the resources for one such explanation.

Further reading