

# On Violence and the News Media

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A GLANCE at any newspaper will convince the most casual reader that this is an age of violence. Wars are reported, deaths, maimings, crimes, accidents. You name them and you will find them, or at least some of them, in practically every edition of every newspaper. Hijacking on the high seas disappeared when pirates went out of fashion, but now we have skyjacking — a new form of violence. Kidnapping has suddenly become a-la-mode — kidnapping which has always been considered one of the most heinous of crimes, has inexplicably reared its ugly head and become more prevalent than it has ever been. There are riots and raids, and those responsible for the maintenance of law and order often outdo in violence those they are attempting to contain. Protest becomes violent and it is met with violence. In this contracting world, with all its complicated network of communications, communication is rapidly breaking down, discussion proves impotent and might is right. The civilized dictum of "Live and let live" is being trampled underfoot by the law of the jungle — "Kill or be killed."

It is impossible to assess whether the world is more or less prone to violence than it has been in the past, but if Press coverage can be taken as an index of the state of the world then relativity becomes irrelevant — all that needs to be considered is that violence is exceedingly prevalent right here and now. One might well be forgiven for wondering why.

Man has made such enormous technological progress that he dare not become involved in total violence for he is in grave danger of destroying himself. Is it because he dare not indulge in total war that he must vent his aggression constantly on a lesser scale? Yet there has been progress in the humanities too. Man has explored his mind, his brain, his emotions, his temperament, his character. Theoretically he should be able to devise means by which his aggressive instincts can be channelled into constructive expression. There has indeed been a development of liberal thought, of recognition of the rights of the individual, of respect for the dignity of man, but all this is apparently impotent in the face of the mailed fist, and impotent to control its use.

Everywhere conflict takes precedence over co-operation, competition over co-existence, destruction over discussion, warfare over welfare, pugilism over pacifism, selfishness over selflessness, violence over virtue. It is not that there is no awareness of the value of co-operation, co-existence, discussion, welfare, pacifism, selflessness, virtue. The very existence of organisations such as the United Nations, the International Red Cross, the International Labour Organisation, the Peace Corps, the Common Market is concrete proof of this awareness. There is ample recognition

of the fact that man can only benefit from living in harmony with his fellow-man, and yet despite all his attempts to do so violence prevails. Why?

Perhaps it is those very means of communication, which should help to bind and to build bridges, which are in fact responsible. In the shortest possible time everyone anywhere can know what is happening everywhere else. Because violence is considered newsworthy while virtue is dull the news contains a concentration of all the violence perpetrated all over the world. The television watcher, the radio listener, the newspaper reader is encouraged to wallow in a plethora of sordiness, squalor, sadism. It is not surprising that sooner or later he comes to accept this as unexceptionable, as inevitable. He may not wish to indulge in such behaviour himself but he no longer reacts to it as he should. His sensitivities become blunted, he develops a cynicism which expects only the worst from his fellow-men. If he is able to retain his faith in what he believes people should be he is regarded as a starry-eyed idealist by all those whose "realism" has been moulded by everything they see and hear. Always the emphasis is on crisis, on horror, on morbidity. Small wonder that positive achievements are overlooked and that people develop a one-sided sense of values with all the emphases in the wrong places.

Nor is it only what is reported that matters so much, it is also the manner in which it is reported. Tradition has ascribed to the journalist and the newscaster the job of reporting facts without comments — just cold, hard facts. This has inevitably led to a kind of two-dimensional presentation which is completely



lacking in depth. There is little if any discussion of cause and effect, of motivations and pressures, of repercussions and results. The outcome of this is that the facts presented become completely divorced from the people they are about. The events themselves take precedence over those who are responsible for them and those who are on the receiving end of them. This impersonal view depersonalises people who eventually cease to matter as people to the multitudes to whom these events are presented as the news of the day. They become numbers, statistics, cyphers — so many maimed or killed in war, so many maimed or killed in accidents, so many hijacked or kidnapped or knifed, or robbed or raided. The implications for these people and for those to whom they matter is utterly lost sight of. There is too much regard for the facts, too little for the human beings involved.

#### Detached attitude

Whether it is intentional or not, and surely it is not — for this sort of presentation of fact by the news media has grown from the unquestionably praiseworthy efforts to present facts in as unbiased and objective a manner as possible — the inevitable result has been the development of a depersonalised and detached attitude towards people in the vast majority of the public, and it is this very attitude which makes violence increasingly possible. If people are not people, if people are not encouraged to identify with other people, to be empathetic and sympathetic, then it becomes that much simpler to commit acts of violence against them. Unpersons do not matter. They can be attacked, they can be violated; physical, mental and moral outrages can be perpetrated upon them, and the whole thing becomes a vicious circle of violence that is reported and that leads to more violence.

Just as complete tolerance can become an expression of weakness so can complete objectivity become an abrogation of human values. When human events are recorded without due regard for the humanity of those involved then this objectivity transforms humans into objects, a highly undesirable state of affairs.

The news media do a tremendous job in keeping the world aware of what is happening in the world. Over the years they have exercised an invaluable influence on people and events everywhere. They wield a degree of power impossible to assess. In the main they have been aware of their responsibility and have attempted to shoulder it through the em-

ployment of techniques which apart from editorial comment, absolve them from criticisms of bias or partiality. I suggest that this is no longer desirable. The world cannot afford such impersonal objectivity. It needs committed people, people who will stand up and be counted, people who are sensitive to the needs and the suffering of other people, people who have convictions and the courage of them, people who respect the dignity and the essential humanity of other people. The news media must use their influence to encourage people to regard people as people, and dispassionate objectivity will never achieve this. Perhaps those who are responsible for a responsible Press might probably consider turning their attention to the devising of new techniques of presentation of the news which will restore to readers a human viewpoint.

If, for instance, newspapers were to stop referring to "the indigent", "the needy", "the disenfranchised", "the displaced", "the liberals", "the leftists", "the underprivileged", "the homeless", to mention but a few examples, and were instead to talk of *people* who are hungry, *people* who have no vote, *people* who have no homes, *people* who believe in liberalism or communism or nationalism, then all those who are being written about would indeed be people to the reader and not abstract labels for and about whom it is unnecessary or inappropriate to feel. If "the unemployed" were people who had no work, and "the rioters" were people who were rioting because they had no work, or felt they were being exploited, or were hungry, and if "the police" who used batons and guns against them were "policemen" who felt themselves threatened and had to protect themselves, then events could still be presented objectively but they

"While politics decide how and when an African man must sleep, when he must wake up, what he must do after waking up, what and where he must eat, how and where he must be housed, the councillors are forbidden to touch on these vital issues.

"If they do so, they are accused of taking part in politics. These issues permeate an individual's life to such an extent that even where he must get his wife is prescribed."

Mr. Francis Mncube,  
Chairman of the Soweto Urban  
Bantu Council.



would not be depersonalised. The public would not then get the impression that they were reading "news" with which there was no call to identify, about impersonal generalisations which bear no resemblance to themselves or to their environment as they know it. They would be reading about people, men and women who think and feel and hurt and react, human beings whose motives could be understood even if or when they might not be condoned.

This may appear to be a simple exercise in semantics, but it implies a significant change in emphasis. It is all too easy for people to remain uncommitted, unconcerned, unmoved, when other people are viewed as categories with convenient labels attached and not as people like themselves. In its determination to present the facts without emotion the Press has fallen into the trap of half-facts, for by-and-large the facts are about people and people

are larger than facts. The vocabulary used to describe them is inadequate. Poor people are poor people. The term "the underprivileged" does not even begin to convey the realities of poverty, neither does the term "the wounded" begin to convey the sufferings of people who have been grievously hurt. It is possible to stir emotions without writing emotionally, but simply by writing about people. If emotions are stirred and complacency is disturbed human beings will once more assume significance as individuals with whom other individuals can and will identify. The news media can play a fundamental role in helping to bring about this change in emphasis which, in its turn, might eventually lead to a rejection of violence, of peace and harmony for all people. Few people commit violence on their neighbours. Let the news media, with their enormous coverage, make neighbours of the world.

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# Education and the Public

F. E. AUERBACH

*Frans Auerbach is a well-known South African educationalist. He spoke to a meeting of the Black Sash in Johannesburg and this is the text of his address.*

**E**DUCATION IS NOT ONLY what takes place in schools. Much of it takes place in the home; most of it reflects the society in which we live. Ours is a divided society; this shows itself in the way we arrange our social relationships, in our attitude to people of different ethnic or language background; and, of course, in our segregated school system. All these are educative influences on all children in South Africa.

Because of the way we run our society, we have not yet developed a common culture — not even a common 'white' culture. There are deep divisions of opinion about censorship, Sunday observance, attitudes to authority and many other matters between English- and Afrikaans-speaking South Africans; these are reflected also in the schools. Many of the stresses about the content of education, such as the place of the theory of evolution in biology or the balance between national and world history in the syllabus, derive from the rather divergent group cultures which exist side by side in our society.

This shows us that teachers do not stand aloof from society: they are part of it, and even when they play a leading role in determining the content and character of education, this role will reflect the cultural back-

ground of the group to which the teacher belongs. I am not suggesting that this is wrong; I am merely reminding you that this is so.

In discussing the role of the public in education, I wish first to deal with the role of the public in school education; I shall return to its broader role later in my talk.

## Financing education

Firstly, then, the public provides the money to run the schools. In a democracy, the share of public spending allotted to education must reflect the importance accorded to it by the majority of the voters; if the voters feel that the education their children receive is not satisfactory, they will soon insist that more money should be spent to improve its quality. Society needs to supervise public spending on education. Yet here we must make a distinc-