

Conflict, Trauma and the Media

Conflict, Trauma and the Media:

A Collection of Essays

Edited by

Guy Hodgson

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

GUY HODGSON

Conflict has many guises. The inclination is to think of war, but political, industrial, religious and cultural differences have ripped apart communities and nation states with the inevitable trauma that follows. Where there is violent discord, catastrophic upheaval and dramatic change the media have been there as witnesses and this book explores the complicated relationship between the reporter, photographer and film-maker and the audience. Journalism, and communication in all its forms, is influenced by propaganda, censorship, subjectivity and, in many cases, simple access to sources and resources, and how those texts, photographs and moving pictures are received differs according to the recipient's background and circumstance. This collection of original essays examines the reporting of conflict across the media and the arts and then looks at the outcomes, be it with the reader, viewer, listener, or even the journalists themselves. They came about as a result of a conference held at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) on the last day of March 2016. Its title was "Conflict, Trauma and the Media" and its inspiration was two-fold: the Department of Journalism's partnership with the Tim Hetherington Trust and to mark the 75th anniversary of Merseyside's most desperate time in the Second World War, the week-long Blitz inflicted by the *Luftwaffe* in May 1941.

Hetherington was a Liverpool-born, award-winning photographer who was killed by shrapnel aged 40 while he was covering the Libyan Civil War in 2011. He had reported on many conflicts including the second Liberian civil war and conducted a year-long study of forces fighting in Afghanistan during which he co-directed and co-filmed *Restrepo*, which won the Grand Jury Prize for the best documentary at the 2010 Sundance Film Festival and was nominated for best documentary at the 2010

Academy Awards.¹ He was also awarded the World Press Photograph of the Year prize in 2007. James Brabazon wrote of Hetherington in the *Guardian*: “The troubled corners of the world into which he shed the light of his lens are brighter because of him; the work he leaves is a candle by which those who choose to look, might see.”² The trust that was set up in his name aims “to preserve the legacy of Tim’s professional life as a visual storyteller and human rights advocate” and soon after the conference an exhibition was staged at LJMU to showcase his life and work.³ His story, and excerpts from the television film *Which Way is the Front Line from Here?*, opened the conference, providing an inspirational sub-plot to the proceedings, but also underlining the dangers that surround journalists when they attempt to bring the horrors of conflict to a wider audience.⁴ News, too frequently, is reported at the ultimate cost.

Had he been around during the Second World War, Hetherington would undoubtedly have, in his words, recorded “big history in the form of small history” in the late Spring of 1941 when Liverpool and the surrounding areas were subjected to seven successive nights of bombing. In Britain, only London suffered more aerial attacks than Merseyside, but in one week 1,741 people from the city, Bootle, Birkenhead and Wallasey were killed, which, to put this into perspective, represented nearly three per cent of every Briton killed in air raids in a period of time that measured 0.32 per cent of the six years of war.⁵ More than 50,000 Liverpoolians were made homeless and only 15 per cent of Bootle’s housing stock was undamaged leaving a further 25,000 without a home. The misery, the feeling that the fabric of life had been ripped away from the local population, was underlined by the concomitant wreckage: 500 roads were closed to traffic; more than 700 water mains and 80 sewers were damaged; and rail transport, gas, electricity and telephone services were destroyed or badly disrupted.⁶ The scale of the destruction, the

¹ *Restrepo*. Directed by Tim Hetherington and Sebastian Junger. Outpost Films, 2010.

² James Brabazon, “Tim Hetherington Obituary”, *Guardian*, April 12, 2001, accessed April 25, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2011/apr/21/tim-hetherington-obituary>

³ Tim Hetherington Trust, accessed March 31, 2017, <http://www.timhetheringtontrust.org/about-us>

⁴ *Storyville*. “Which Way is the Front Line from Here? The Life and Time of Tim Hetherington”. Directed by Sebastian Junger. BBC4, September 22, 2015.

⁵ Juliet Gardiner, *The Blitz: The British Under Attack* (London: Harper, 2011), 322.

⁶ May Blitz, Merseyside Maritime Museum, accessed April 25, 2017, <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/maritime/exhibitions/blitz/may.aspx>

thousands grieving and the sense of hopelessness understandably left deep scars that confuse the modern day narrative of unflinching resilience. As one Liverpool woman wrote:

[Winston] Churchill was telling us how brave we all were and that we would never surrender. I tell you something – the people of Liverpool would have surrendered overnight if they could have. It's all right for people in authority, down in their steel-lined dugouts, but we were there and it was just too awful.⁷

Another woman, who was a child in 1941, was more sanguine. “They tried to wipe us off the earth. They nearly did but they didn’t quite, did they?”⁸ The big history is Blitz fortitude and “all in this together” defiance; the small history, almost without exception, is more nuanced.

A conference is only as good as its ingredients, be they be the speakers, the papers or, indeed, the audience, and it was hugely satisfying that the LJMU event attracted 17 researchers from countries as diverse as Italy, Sweden and China and from across the regions and nations of Britain. They delivered inter-disciplinary studies that explored the many strands of the reporting and commemoration of disasters, man-made and natural. This book, a collection of those papers and other associated material, is loosely based on Stuart Hall’s communication model of production (encoding), the texts (images and reports), and their reception by the audience (decoding), although the circular process that now exists between practitioners and their viewers, listeners and readers inevitably blurs distinctions.⁹ The first half of the book concentrates on the film makers, photographers and journalists working in the field – sometimes literally as circumstance and deprivation require them to embed with fighters or suffering civilians. The second half studies the reactions of the audience, finishing on an upbeat note with two chapters that emphasise the constructive effect the media can have on potentially fractious and dangerous situations.

⁷ Marie Price, in *Forgotten Voices of the Blitz and the Battle of Britain*, ed. by Joshua Levine (London: Ebury, 2006), p. 412.

⁸ Dorothy Laycock, in Merseyside Maritime Museum, accessed April 25, 2017, <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/maritime/exhibitions/blitz/blitz.aspx>

⁹ Stuart Hall, ‘Encoding/Decoding’, in *Media Studies: A Reader*, 2nd edn, ed. by Paul Marris and Sue Thornham, (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 51-61.

Chapter Summary

War, as the biggest man-inflicted trauma, is, not surprisingly, a predominant theme in this book and the opening chapter of the encoding section encapsulates the “discussion” between journalists and their audience. Tim Markham argues that, while there is academic consensus that Western audiences do not care as much as they should about faraway victims of conflict, war and injustice, there is less agreement about reconnecting audiences. Recent theorisations of violence, drawing on Charles Taylor and ultimately Adam Smith, have emphasised the role that imagination might play in fostering understanding of the subjective experience of conflict.¹⁰ In contrast, this chapter contends that both the pathologisation of audience responses to mediated conflict and the remedies intended to shake people out of their indifference rest on a misconception of how the recognition of other subjectivities plays out in everyday life. This chapter investigates the experience of media practitioners who self-evidently do care about others: journalists and media activists in Beirut, Lebanon, whose work focuses inter alia on the casualties and refugees of the war in neighbouring Syria. Seen at the level of the everyday, this experience can be similarly lacking in revelation, but its meaningfulness is not undermined by its banalities. The chapter argues that the dearth of intense moments of subjective recognition in ordinary contexts of media consumption is both rational and ethically defensible.

There is a gap in the literature about Guantanamo with little attention to how journalists have covered the detention centre or the contestation in the media about the moral gaze of the media spectacle. Anita Howarth’s chapter addresses this with an exploration of the “Guantanamo chair”, a device used in 2013 to restrain hunger strikers while force-feeding them. The control of information and images of Guantanamo has been part of the attempt by officials and successive White Houses to shape what Judith Butler has termed the “mandated perspective” of war whereby governments use framing to determine what is included and what is excluded from view, and thereby attempt to shape the meanings ascribed to the spectacle.¹¹ However, as Yasmin Ibrahim has argued, the making visible invites the spectacle and a moral gaze—that is the ascribing of meaning is more open than a “mandated perspective” suggests.¹² The

¹⁰ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (London: Penguin, 2010 [1759]); Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

¹¹ Judith Butler, “Photography, War, Outrage.” *PLMA* 120:3 (2005): 822–827.

¹² Ibrahim, Yasmin. “The Non-Stop ‘capture’: The Politics of Looking in Postmodernity.” *The Poster* 1:2 (January 25, 2011): 167–85.
doi:10.1386/post.1.2.167_1.

chapter explores this contestation through an analysis of the images and discourses of the “chair”, between on the one hand, the official framing that medicalized and sanitized “feeding” and, on the other hand, challenges to these framings through an experiential framing which re-inserted the “force” into “force-feeding”.

While Howarth concentrated on photographs, the following chapter studies a different form of “text”: the moving image. Valeria Mancinelli investigates the media and artistic representation of terrorism with a particular focus on airplane hijacking. The starting point is *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* (1997) by Johan Grimont, a chronology of hijackings that denounces the media spectacle and seeks to detect the impact of images on our feelings, our knowledge and our memory. Other films, Eric Baudelaire’s *The Anabasis of May and Fusako Shigenobu, Masao Adachi, and 27 Years without Images* (2011), an intricate and disorienting tale of the history of the Japanese Red Army (JRA), and Naeem Mohaiemen’s *United Red Army* (2011-12), which reconstructs the hijacking of the flight 472 at the hands of the JRA by using the original sound recordings from the airport control tower, are also analysed. The videos explore in different ways the relation between cinema and guerrilla fighting, with the idea that starts to emerge, especially regarding the JRA, that the spectacle is the real battlefield. Today this “tradition” has mutated into a ruthless and aware use of the media by the terrorists. She contends that going back to the past will allow a more detached and open discussion in the future.

These first three chapters concentrate on media production; in the next Zhen Troy Chen addresses the impact of covering tragic events on the communicators themselves, with an emphasis on Chinese journalists. This chapter attempts to fill a gap as previous studies of this nature have been largely Anglo-American or European centric, but Chinese reporters have become an increasing presence in conflict zones since the 1990s even though many are not trained or prepared for the horrific scenes they will see and endure. Some have returned home to confront personal symptoms similar to the victims on which they reported, including post-traumatic stress disorder and secondary traumatic stress. This chapter addresses the challenges they face and includes interviews with four journalists working for leading Chinese national news outlets. The interviewees, who cover the broad spectrum of the media, text, photography and television, discuss the stress of being immersed in human tragedy and the need for greater emotional and psychological support for media practitioners in Chinese newsrooms. As one journalist put it: “I can feel I am a bit intense in everything I do, especially after I return home. I would drive very fast sometimes as if I was in the war zone and someone is after me.”

The second half of this book concentrates on the decoders and Emma Heywood's chapter explores the influential role played by television in shaping attitudes and behaviours with regard to conflict. It investigates audience perceptions of violence in the foreign conflict coverage of three television news providers from very differing systems. These are *Vremya* from Russia's Channel 1, a national, state-aligned broadcaster; *BBC News at Ten*, representing a British public service broadcaster; and *20 Heures* from France 2, a media system with a long history of state intervention. A series of focus groups were conducted in the UK, France, Russia and the West Bank to determine participants' understanding of the conflict, their perceptions of violence in the coverage and levels of violence they considered acceptable. The groups also discussed victims, and hierarchies of victims, in the fighting and whether participants considered any levels of compassion had been created between them, as the viewer, and the victim. Focus group members also considered whether any particular countries and international organisations were dominant in the reports. The findings, which are supported by analyses of representations of the war in Gaza 2014, provide a valuable backdrop against which comparative studies into current conflict situations may be conducted.

The use of media by terrorists, discussed in Mancinelli's chapter, is relatively new; governments have a longer pedigree in attempting to manufacture consent, with all the tensions that implies between the executive and the media. Guy Hodgson's chapter examines the nadir in the relationship between the UK government and newspapers in the Second World War when Winston Churchill wanted to close the *Daily Mirror*. This was motivated by a Philip Zec cartoon that was received as intended by the public, but caused fury in Downing Street and it required the combined efforts of politicians and Fleet Street to stay Churchill's hand. Even so, the language in the admonishment of the *Mirror* by the Home Secretary in the Houses of Parliament was extreme and underlined the very real threat to the freedom the press in Britain. The chapter charts the response to this commination, initially by newspapers but secondly, by studying archives, the public. The findings show that readers generally opposed the government's warning, contrary to the traditional image of a British people made unquestioning by a determination to win the war. They also bring a new light on the relationship between newspapers and their readers and question the ability of the former to influence public opinion.

The book finishes on a positive note by stressing the benefits of the media in diffusing potential conflict. Simon Gwyn Roberts' chapter examines the communicative and political potential of networked

communication in the specific context of marginalized linguistic communities, in this case the remnant Welsh-speaking population in Patagonia, Argentina, Descended from Nineteenth Century migrants, this “enclave” has been absorbed into the wider Argentinian ethnic and linguistic melting pot with Welsh-speaking residents now Argentinian citizens claiming dual linguistic/cultural heritage, and therefore represents a kind of archetype for a wider journey towards compromise, inclusivity and hybridity. The chapter looks specifically at the Welsh communities’ use of social media (primarily Facebook and Twitter) to articulate community concerns within the wider context of Argentinian national politics. The Welsh-speaking community in Patagonia is both small (around 5,000 speakers) and dispersed geographically (the two main communities are separated by 600km of largely unpopulated desert). It is this latter point that provides the key rationale for this study, which explores the effects of networked communication shrinking long-standing “problems of geography”. Historically, the Welsh-language media in Argentina was remarkably vibrant but also highly fragmented: with dozens of small-scale newspapers thriving across the region, all of which were generally restricted to individual towns and incapable of serving the community as a whole.

The final chapter, by Fiona Wyton and David Baines, completes the communication circle in that it reviews a project in which the decoders, in this case 398 children and young people, became encoders. Hosted in Northern Ireland by the Headliners charity, they worked together to report across community fault-lines and develop a shared vision by tackling hard issues of sectarianism and social, political and religious divisions. Groups from Catholic, Protestant and minority ethnic communities used media tools and journalism skills to produce and publish reports that demonstrated how communities could resolve conflict and share divided ground. In developing the project - *Distinctive Voices, Collective Choices* - Headliners drew on its expertise in developing a range of learning through journalism strategies to give young people, often from groups who are alienated, marginalised and disengaged, a voice and a hearing on issues that concern them. The project was evaluated through participant surveys at entry and exit to identify changes across a range of themes and data was continuously captured on multiple media platforms through participant observation. These young people were found to have developed deeper understandings of “shared space”; were better able and prepared to discuss inter-community issues; and, equally, to relate to members of other communities by recognising similarity and respecting

difference. They had developed a greater reflexivity concerning their own attitudes, opinions and behaviour towards others.

Tim Hetherington, when discussing the media in the context of conflict and trauma, said: “It’s about personalisation. Often we see scenes of disaster and it’s almost that we forget that the people imaged are individuals with individual stories and lives.”¹³ This book attempts to tell some of those stories.

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ENCODING

CHAPTER TWO

BANAL PHENOMENOLOGIES OF VIOLENCE: MEDIA WORK CULTURES AND AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT WITH DISTANT TRAUMA

TIM MARKHAM

Much of the recent literature on mediated violence has emphasized its experiential dimension.¹ Instead of inferring the meaning or ethics of this kind of media through the content of its texts, scholars have tried to develop a better understanding of the relationship posited between viewer and viewed. The starting assumption is that there is something wrong with this relationship, either in absolute terms or in the context of contemporary media saturation, with audiences not fully apprehending the nature and scale of the suffering depicted. Susan Moeller puts this down to compassion fatigue, a condition induced by corporate media that have an interest in peddling conflict and misery, and doing so in sensationalist, dehumanizing ways.² Keith Tester concurs, averring that the proliferation of media coverage of suffering is actively counter-productive: the greater the coverage, the less visible the reality of the violence.³

In media theory, the question is whether the dehumanization of others is a product of the particular media we have, or mediation itself? Richard Sennett reminds us that this echoes a debate that was live in the Eighteenth Century, with Jean-Jacques Rousseau arguing that any attempt to represent

¹ See for instance Lilie Chouliaraki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006); Lilie Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-humanitarianism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013); Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

² Susan Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War, and Death* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

³ Keith Tester, *Compassion, Morality and the Media* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1994).

human trauma through dramatic means threatens to undermine the ethical impulse that motivates it.⁴ Jean le Rond d'Alembert countered that only dramatic discourse can do justice to the texture of human experience, prefiguring Luc Boltanski's injunction that there is something distinctly perverse about recounting the facts of genocide drily and mechanically.⁵ Lillie Chouliaraki locates the exchange adjacent to Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which contends that imagination is the key to empathy.⁶ Whether one uses fact or fiction or something in between to depict human suffering, audiences need to be invited to speculate about what that experience would be like, not simply told what to think and feel.

While many have fretted about the distance media representation creates between viewer and viewed, and others have warned of the dangers of media obliterating that distance, Roger Silverstone instead writes about the right kind of distance – proper distance, as he calls it. Proper for what is the obvious question, and this boils down to recognition of subjectivity – that is, what relational positionality between subject and object allows for and encourages the recognition that the objects of one's media gaze are themselves fully-fledged subjects.⁷ In this vein, Chouliaraki resists the metaphysical claim that there is just something about mediation which reduces traumatized others to spectacle, and instead investigates what kinds of spectacles are produced and with what implications for recognition, empathy and action.⁸ It is true that some representations of violence ask to be read as entertainments, and also that there are modes of reading which are predisposed to decoding texts by way of the tropes of drama, thriller and tragedy. A second plausible response to mediated suffering might go so far as pity, but the debate goes on as to whether pity can ever form a basis for subjective recognition, let alone mutual citizenship or membership of an imagined community.

The third and idealized response to a mediated encounter with a suffering other is ecstatic: literally that which takes one out of oneself, grabbing our lapels and shaking us out of our over-habituated comfort zone. In this Chouliaraki mirrors Susan Sontag's hope that the photographs of the tortured prisoners of Abu Ghraib would wake people

⁴ Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

⁵ Chouliaraki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering*, 30; Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media, and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁶ Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator*.

⁷ Roger Silverstone, *Media and Morality: On the Rise of the Mediapolis* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006).

⁸ Chouliaraki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering*.

from their cosseted, media-induced comas to finally grasp the reality of war.⁹ However, a questionable premise underpins these discussions: namely, that media audiences do not care enough about the trauma they see on their screens. And it leads quickly to a question that is yet more contentious: what can media practitioners do to make people care more? This chapter offers a response to the pathologization of the absence of revelatory moments of media consumption. It does so by way of an examination of the experience of media practitioners who really do care about others: 20 journalists in Beirut and Cairo whose work focuses on the plight of refugees, social injustice and the war in Syria. Seen at the level of the everyday, this experience can be similarly lacking in revelation and intensity most of the time, but its meaningfulness is not undermined by its banalities.

Media Witnessing and Subjective Recognition

That many of those who witnessed the various uprisings of the early part of this decade did so from afar, often with a limited understanding of history, politics and language, presents clear problems. Are clueless distant spectators chipping in with their view on events in Tahrir Square on Twitter somehow worse than those who do not engage at all? Are Western academics and journalists commenting on conflicts in the Arab world inevitably complicit in the neo-colonial subjugation of its peoples, however pure their intentions? We have been here before, needless to say. Edward Said pushed beyond doubt the fact that the Middle East of the West's imagining cannot escape centuries of exploitation, bloodshed, literature and tourism.¹⁰ And yet to posit the insuperability of Orientalism as a Foucauldian sort of always-everywhere discourse, while politically compelling, does us little good as we seek better ways to understand and engage with the wider world. Just as problematic is the refusal of critical academic engagement, instead framing historic events as the expression of some authentic Arab culture – or worse yet, Arab street – as though such an embodying, reductive essence existed. Like everything else we encounter in the world, the people, places and events of the Arab world appear to us as objects – of journalism, international relations, travel and so on. Objectification is a given; the key task is to unpack how it proceeds and on the basis of what assumptions, always motivated by the Hegelian

⁹ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003).

¹⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978).

imperative of apprehending the full subjectivity of that objectified other, a subjectivity for which we in turn are other.

Recognition of the subjective other is no small feat, still less embedding recognition in professional practice and institutionalizing it in broadcaster mission statements and journalistic codes of practice. Lois McNay makes a compelling case that all recognition is essentially misrecognition, deriving from the phenomenological tenet that perception always begins with intention; intensive recognition always comes from the recognizer not the recognizee.¹¹ Judith Butler makes this point more sharply political, arguing that the act of recognizing amounts to the incited performance of subjectivity on the part of the recognized: it is not just that we do not see them for who they are, we require them to be the selves that we see.¹² Both tie into more widespread angst about a contemporary crisis of recognition. Whether it is because of galloping narcissism, the commodification of everything or the inexorable pervasiveness of mediated representation, there is something fundamentally lacking in the relations that unknown others have with each other. This is not simply about solipsism, since the inability to grasp the reality of others prevents us from understanding the profundity of change and continuity in the world *we* inhabit on a daily basis. For Hegel this is much more than a belief that people should try to imagine walking in another's shoes; it is how subjectification works, the dialectic through which individually and collectively we perceive and act in the world around us as we are perceived and acted on by it.

If there is a crisis of recognition, then, it is one of self-identity as well as global citizenship. The selves we instinctively see and the worlds they invoke when we watch conflict and violence on the news are insuperable stereotypes, while the selves we snap into becoming as we watch are short-circuited, stunted. Worse yet, the collective act of watching amounts to subjugating others to our regimes of recognition, while those subjects that we snap into becoming are not our own. What if each is not just an accident of history, but the expression of economic and political logics embedded in cultural norms, industries and the very architectures of the technologies that mediate between us all? How can we make people more aware not only of the lives of traumatized others but of the implicatedness of our own lived presents, as well as the historic contingency that what is experienced as utterly normal and unremarkable would actually come to pass? And, finally, how can we ensure apprehension by audiences and

¹¹ Lois McNay, *Against Recognition* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).

¹² *Ibid.*

publics of what is at stake in how things unfold from here, for both those caught up in conflict and ourselves? An important starting point is to disentangle what is at stake in the playing out of history and what is at stake in each encounter – everything in the case of the former, this chapter contends, but not so much in the latter. Rowing back from the idea that particular mediated encounters between distant others matter makes the question of solidarity one of on-going work, work that does not have to be continuous, intense and focussed. This changes the game for journalists, humanitarian campaigners and academics, from one in which the goal is to produce critical encounters that break through habituated experience, to something less intense but more protracted, and able to underpin a more dispersed, generalized orientation towards subjective recognition.

Apathy and fatalism are real among publics and audiences in many parts of the world, and yet against this kind of stasis, subjectivity by definition lacks foreclosure: it is an on-going process in whose unfolding individuals and collectives have an interest. Engagement with the world is not all or nothing but enacted haphazardly through the minutiae of life. It might not be the case that left to our own devices we are all equally disposed towards developing an orientation to the world built around solidarity with others, but we are inclined towards developing an orientation that is *liveable*. And what makes our selves just liveable – having a consistent sense of who we are and how we are seen – in everyday contexts may, while in situ we might look disengaged, distracted or self-regarding, over time can congeal into something more substantive: an orientation to the world that is sufficiently generic that means our selves are not in jeopardy in each encounter with actual others, but also that we are nonetheless able to recognize the profundity of the subjectivity of others undergoing conflict and violence.

Professional Media Cultures in Cairo and Beirut

Studies of professional identity and political motivation tend to be explicit about principle.¹³ There is nothing invalid about this, but in methodological terms it necessitates certain modes of response: if respondents are asked to reflect on the principles that guide their practice, they will do so. Such second-order reflections can produce genuine insight, but they are invariably performative – not inauthentic per se, but

¹³ Terry Johnson, *Professions and Power* (London: Macmillan, 1972); Engin Isin: *Being Political: Genealogies of Citizenship* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

incited discourse in Butler's phrase, narratives previously mastered and spontaneously enacted in the interview setting.¹⁴ Motivating principles, professional values and political identities are not, however, abstract. They have meaning only insofar as they are embedded in the routines of everyday life. This is consistent with phenomenology more broadly, which encompasses many different schools of thought but which cleaves to the view that the world is experienced not with reference to abstract concepts but by being and acting in the world. For the most part this is seamless and taken-for-granted, and it is precisely in the way that individuals come to inhabit and navigate their worlds routinely, effortlessly and without meditating on why they do what they do that it is possible to grasp what makes their work – or any other aspect of their lives – instinctively meaningful.

For the sake of this research, then, meaningfulness of political and professional practice is not about wanting to change the world – though such reflections were offered and taken into account – but what makes it worth getting out of bed for, day in, day out. The interviews all started by asking respondents to talk their way through a regular day, if such a thing existed for them, or the previous day if not. This is where the banal of the title comes to the fore, with prompts about when they get up, what social media they check in on as part of their morning routine, how they get to work, their interactions while at work or anywhere else during the day, their socializing, the work produced, their moods and so on. Particularly in relation to social practice, care was taken not to privilege the kind of behavior that would normally stand as evidence of political solidarity or community building. These were not ignored, but neither was gossip, complaining, flirting, mocking and passing the time.

There are some methodological issues that arise when carrying out interviews of this type, not least that respondents tend to want to perform to expectations and can feel frivolous talking about the more mundane aspects of their lives. This was especially the case with the three interviews that were conducted through interviews (“You want me to ask him about his email?”). But most were reassured by explanations that this approach is motivated by the desire not to impose theoretical constructs but instead to see what emerges from everyday talk – the kind of rationale that underpins grounded theory. More pointedly, there was a shared resentment of what was referred to more than once as academic tourism: Western scholars wading in and explaining events in the post-2010 Arab

¹⁴ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 1997).

world using language and ideas that do not come close to understanding the world that respondents live in. The banal approach owes a lot to Goffman, and especially the focus on microstructures of behavior and the informal rules that govern social interactions.¹⁵ But in truth the empirical work was less self-consciously artless than either grounded theory or Goffman seeks to be, and more in line with Giddens' insistence that it is in everyday practice that structuration – that is, the structuring of practice as well as its structuring effects – is revealed.¹⁶

There is no substantive reason to doubt the sincerity of participants in the present study when they describe what motivates them – a keen sense of public duty, a passionate commitment to human rights and social justice, a steadfast belief in the importance of deliberation. It is always technically possible to reduce all expressions of altruism to self-interest, and expressions of any kind to performative practice, but this makes little practical sense in the face of interviewees who were able seamlessly to speak to personal principles both in the abstract and in the toing and froing of everyday life. This is where the meaningfulness of principled practice is sustained or not, after all. And diving in to those banal practicalities tells us a lot about what it means to be political, to be principled, to care.¹⁷ Social media, for instance, was more often than not referred to as a drain on time rather than something which transformed their political agency; covering demonstrations on the other side of town wiped out the possibility of getting anything else done, while emails piled up mercilessly; interfering editors were criticized not for impinging on journalistic integrity but creating needless extra work. Respondents consistently reported a proliferation of political activism in both cities in recent times, and while it was usually implied that this is a good thing, it too was talked about in terms of work: the time taken to report protests, the resources required, staying up late, getting up early, being constantly on the phone, having less of a social life, not spending enough time with the kids. The point, though, is that all of these experiences should not be thought of as competing demands on one's being in the world but complementary ones. Political subjectivity is sustained through all of these things and not in spite of them. It is possible that the sense of constant busyness that journalistic work affords is at the core of respondents' generalized

¹⁵ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959).

¹⁶ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge: Polity, 1984).

¹⁷ See also Graeber's activist ethnographies: David Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2009).

experience of meaningfulness. Importantly, this does not hollow out professional and political principle. It is the regularity and frequency of practices from writing and campaigning to texting and checking Facebook that sustain the meaningfulness of principle, as much as principle sustaining the meaningfulness of these practices.

Something similar can be said for the routine social practices respondents engage in. From a more strictly Bourdieusian perspective this might be characterized as the collective suspension of disbelief about meaningfulness that goes on in all professional and cultural fields.¹⁸ But this holds only if all social practices are at some level oriented towards the conservative reproduction of structures, and this is a normative claim rather than one that can be inferred. It is entirely plausible that, as with busyness, social activity sustains professional and political meaningfulness, as much as any deeply held conviction about what counts as meaningful sustains cultures of socializing. While there was evidence that both paid and unpaid work can crowd out some social practices, it was also clear that being at work or out on the streets being political was itself very sociable, and often outright fun. In one sense this is obvious: at least exchanging pleasantries is one of the unspoken rules of professional interaction, while attending a demonstration in Beirut or San Francisco invariably entails as much catching up with acquaintances, sharing cultural references and easy jokes as it does chanting slogans. But it was also apparent that life in newsrooms allowed for more socializing than is the case in, for instance, Nick Davies' account of contemporary British journalism.¹⁹ There were snarky asides about colleagues who were lazy or domineering or sexist, but plenty of comments too about colleagues being like a second family or just enjoyable to be around. It was also evident at the headquarters of As-Safir and Al-Ahram, with co-workers routinely sticking their heads around each other's doors, making humorous observations, exchanging gossip and making plans for dinner. Conventionally we would see such conviviality as a natural outgrowth, what happens when individuals who share a pre-existing professional passion and political commitment come together. But it works the other way, too: affectively enjoyable daily routines sustain that sense of passion and commitment over time. The latter is contingent on the former: principles are not innate, after all, but experienced as integral to one's identity only to the extent that conditions exist in which their iterative,

¹⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994).

¹⁹ Nick Davies, *Flat Earth News: An Award-Winning Reporter Exposes Falsehood, Distortion and Propaganda in the Global Media* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2008).

habituated enactment is effortless. Principles are not hardwired and wielded in spite of external constraints; they are subjectively meaningful only insofar as there are contexts in which they are just thinkable and just doable.

The interviews are full of talk about politics, activism and journalism, but also sport, technology, shopping and, notably, food. When pressed to say more about their colleagues, friends and interlocutors, respondents tended to focus more on personal traits rather than their political outlook, including when the relationship was otherwise clearly predicated on shared beliefs and commitments. Instead of casting judgments on someone's values and dedication, then, approval more commonly took the form of references to their children, sense of humour or status; disapproval of their meanness, arrogance or unimportance. The picture that develops is of a sprawling network of ties strong and weak, built around a plethora of routine engagements and encounters that are sometimes distinctly political, but mostly just human. It is worth noting that reported interactions were often abstracted rather than actual, perhaps not surprising given that the practice that unified all respondents was writing, and writing usually involves imagining an audience. The network to which they belonged appeared to subsist through a constant on-going conversation between comrades, colleagues, readers and followers, but one that was often experienced as hypothetical and speculative, an internal dialogue. In any case, the central point is that it is this web of social interactions, often enjoyable, usually humdrum, that allows for the collective meaningfulness of political principle to solidify and endure – rather than the inherent meaningfulness of abstract principle inspiring that web into existence.

If this image of communicative camaraderie appears cosy, informal and collaborative, it should be emphasized that discord, mistrust and fatalism are also threaded through several transcripts. Especially among older interviewees there was a strong belief that the conflicts underpinning the Lebanese civil war had not been resolved but merely papered over, and that they threatened to re-emerge at any time. In Cairo the most experienced reporters were also the most jaded, seeing corruption and cronyism as intractable and their own agency as journalists hopelessly circumscribed. The risk, however, is to cast journalists and activists in this part of the world as noble warriors, doggedly continuing their struggle in spite of everything. There are real dangers associated with being politically active in Egypt and Lebanon, and these should not be underestimated. Journalists have been killed and imprisoned in large numbers in Egypt, and for all the talk of the ineffectuality of government censors, intimidation is experienced regularly in both countries. But the

interviews do not reveal reporters and campaigners tirelessly clinging to political principles in the face of enormous obstacles. Instead, they show principles made meaningful by shared cultures of practice that, whatever the backdrop, are often routine and affect-driven. Principle is not predicated on a *happy* workplace or social network. All kinds of affective routines can nurture it, from simple familiarity to, counter-intuitively, resignation: wearily or wryly conceding and continuing to concede that things will never change is a way to enact principled subjectivity in everyday life; it is not a matter of holding on determinedly to inner principle in the absence of contexts in which it can be externalized.

One final assumption that warrants unpacking is that groups of professionals or amateurs united by a common political cause will tend to be horizontal in their organization, resisting hierarchy in the name of consolidating tribal identity. The Beirut cohort in particular largely explicitly referred to their work as activism, and across the two cities these media professionals were extensively networked with reform-minded others, networks that combined a high degree of social media engagement with other kinds of mediated and face-to-face communication. Much recent research argues that the fluid, multifarious connections afforded by network cultures tend towards a greater degree of individualism in political movements, as opposed to the supremacy of the collective favoured by politics done the old way, with manifestoes hammered out in smoky rooms through clearly defined organizational structures and processes.²⁰ Individualism by this view does not connote competitiveness, though, but rather its opposite: individuals committing themselves only as much as they are comfortable with, linked in such a way as to effect a collective agency that is simultaneously greater than the sum of its parts but undirected, leaderless (or leaderful). No one wields disproportionate influence, and nor does any ideological commitment or historical legacy.

There was precious little evidence to support this model—most closely associated with the Occupy movements, but readily transposed to the Arab uprisings at the time – in our sample population. A large majority rejected both the role of passive documenter of events and of public servant, there to inform but not influence their audience. They consciously resisted indoctrinating their readers and viewers, but influence is precisely what they aimed to cultivate. Those most immersed in activist movements – the ones who organized and participated in demonstrations rather than just covering them – were also quick to dispel any notion of an organic, self-

²⁰ See especially Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012).

organizing collective. All in some way saw themselves as leaders, and the way they presented themselves as such demonstrated unequivocally that ego matters. This falls a long way short of egomania: the assumed role is not about recruiting disciples or forming a political vanguard as such, but nor is it the passive curating of other people's thoughts and opinions. In short, most derived palpable satisfaction from their role as authorities, not dictating what others should think but guiding them, coming up with new ideas and arguments, creating new discursive spaces that others could participate in. This, too, could be seen as something sustained by personal conviction, and there was certainly a good deal of confidence and passion on display. Importantly, though, occupying a privileged position was not experienced so much as a burden or solemn duty, but frequently very enjoyable. And this enjoyment derived as much from the sense of doing worthy work well as from the buzz of getting a lot of likes and re-tweets. This last statement could be read as an accusation of frivolousness, but really it is not: regular, affective pleasures can be just as instrumental in nourishing conviction as deeply held principle. Detailed awareness of audience reach and impact on social media, and obvious delight at having a lot of approving followers, is not at all inconsistent with unwavering political commitment; indeed, it might underpin it.

Consistent with Butler, enduring political subjectivity for this cohort was contingent on the mastery of a repertoire of practices, some more banal and affective than others. Reflexivity was conspicuous: most displayed a heavily ironic perspective on their own status, fully aware that a good deal of performance and identity management is required to achieve recognition and status. Talk of the absurdity of media activism was frequent, with the requirement for believable sincerity always undercut by the desire to be famous and influential. But it is a game worth playing, not only because of the political stakes but personal ones too. More specifically, confident enjoyment of the game spoke to a shared though implicit feeling that everything was always to play for, for them if not for the country as a whole. This in no way casts their activism as narcissistic; it is precisely what provides the day-to-day momentum of their work. This is significant in itself, but in what follows it will be seen to have real implications for how we think about audiences of upheaval and suffering as well, the experience of the self seen not as comprising stable, established beliefs and values but very much as work in progress. The pleasure this group of professionals derive from their work comes not from simply expressing what they think, but from participating in an environment in which they have a stake in shaping how they are seen and what that affords them.