

IT'S THE MEDIA, STUPID!

Essays in Honour
of Brian Winston

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Towards Restorative Narrative

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This chapter argues for an experiment in bringing together moving image and mediation practices to create a more relational media – socially designed and biased enough to nurture the connective tissue between communities, drawing on practices from restorative justice including deep listening and searching for shades of grey. Meanwhile, swathes of social and mass media are increasingly polarised. Key production processes and financial structures feed this trend, magnifying the attitudes and algorithms that lean towards conflict. This trend hollows out the quality or sometimes the prospect of dialogue in the public sphere and threatens to break the connective tissue that forms the habitus of UK multi-cultures. In response to these issues, the chapter suggests some strategies to refuse and reverse toxic polarisation. It argues that the need for participatory and community media is stronger than ever and asks: what is needed to create meetings and media to build creative explorations that nurture empathic understanding, especially when we disagree? Finally, can the processes of restorative justice offer a model for ‘restorative narrative’ that could frame a new media genre of storytelling designed to build mutual understanding and connection that obtains on either side of emotive issues whether or not we agree?

Keywords: restorative narrative, polarisation, mass media, ethics

Mass media journalism typically presents words, images, rushes and stories by grasping, heightening and juxtaposing tension and differences. This suits (and is shaped by) a news storytelling culture that privileges black-and-white clashes of current or coming conflict. The bias leans towards the dramatic, serving audiences that mostly expect and reliably consume this dynamic to ‘make sense’ of a far more complex world.

These dynamics are recently joined, supported and extended by swathes of social media that blur distinctions between fact and editorial comment, further enabled by the now commonplace rendering of disinformation in the texture of communications. Today, far too much of our mixed media landscape can be characterised by ‘toxic polarisation’ (Coleman 2021). Whilst liberal democracies are familiar with articulating threats to ‘free speech’, they are less practised in

reflecting on and counteracting the insidious effects of speech untethered from community values or a connecting vision. This primes the landscape for a culture of polarisation to flourish.

In 'old media', this dynamic was already problematic. I quickly found in my work in print, radio and television current affairs that the compression necessary for short sound-bites and 'punchy' headlines meant that shades of grey were better explored elsewhere, some distance from the news agenda. I settled on longer-form documentary practices.

Across thirty years, in many places and with people facing conflict or its aftermath, I have listened closely to and reported on the aftermath of atrocity, sometimes engaging disparate arguments on different sides of an event, idea or issue. In South Africa, Rwanda, Aboriginal Australia, the UK and elsewhere I have tried to explore counter-arguments with each side in the search for understandings for diverse audiences, conceiving documentary film as a kind of arena in which many experiences can unfold, with enough open space for an audience to make sense of competing perceptions and experiences and settle on their own view. Today I wonder if this is enough. Rather than mirroring reality, too much media risks further damaging the situations it purports to describe, leaving a more polarised trail for audiences and uncomfortable but necessary questions for practitioners (Rughani 2010: 169).

I'm about to make an argument for an experiment in bringing together film and mediation practices to rethink the information architecture for a more relational media – socially designed to be biased enough to nurture the connective tissue *between* communities, drawing on practices from restorative justice including deep listening and searching for shades of grey. In making the case, it's important to underline the essential work of robust and rigorous reporting and its significance, for example in exposing crime, corruption and holding officials to account. Errol Morris's film *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) was both a stylistic innovation in documentary practice and is widely credited with securing the release from prison of Randall Adams who had been convicted for a murder he did not commit. Morris urges that documentary innovation should not be marked by a retreat into partiality and implicitly cautions against the solipsistic dangers of relativism:

To those who argue that there's no such thing as objective truth, I say ask a man strapped in an electric chair who says 'I didn't do it' ... forgive me there is such a thing as truth – the truth (Morris 2011).

The argument here is not about 'objectivity' or the importance of investigative journalism or the inevitable 'black-and-white' aspects of the fourth estate. Rather it is a response to the reflex polarisation of media cultures and the risk of public scepticism turning further towards cynicism, with consequences for social cohesion in diverse communities where the work of creating and recreating dialogue in UK multi-cultures is fragile and, by turns, contested.

TIPPING POINTS

It is widely documented how voting is fuelled by playing on fear of the ‘outsider’, stereotypes and bigotry, often seeded by Russian bots. Their pivotal effect in fuelling the ‘alt right’ has already tipped many elections. In 2018, the UK Electoral Commission found the Vote Leave Campaign guilty of breaking electoral law, referring them to the National Crime Agency for investigation. In May 2020, police confirmed that no action would be taken. Pro-Brexit campaigns paid £3.5 million to AggregateIQ (AIQ) to collect and analyse people’s data in order to personalise fake political slogans – for example, to spread the lie that Turkey was about to join the EU, to whip up and channel racialised fear. Dominic Cummings, Vote Leave’s director, boasted on AIQ’s website: ‘Without a doubt, the Vote Leave campaign owes a great deal of its success to the work of AggregateIQ. We couldn’t have done it without them.’

How can storytelling travel a wiser route to enable open discussion that might withstand visceral prejudices? Just ten years ago, Wael Ghonim’s Facebook page was widely credited as a catalyst for the Tahrir Square demonstrations that marked the brief Arab Spring in Cairo in 2011. The web enabled freer speech but that season, in Egypt, ended in military intervention, a coup and the return to dictatorship in all but name. Ghonim later re-evaluated social media, disturbed by its reckless use by populists, activists and dictators. He fled Egypt and later co-founded a new social media platform, Parlio, that included a civility pledge and used real names. ‘We’re here to learn new perspectives; not to win arguments,’ the platform said. Trolling was forbidden and ‘expanding horizons’ privileged.

Parlio developed from Ghonim’s question: how to design social media experiences to nurture thoughtfulness, civility or quality of engagement? Assessment of such aspirations is overdue (especially since Parlio was bought by Quora in March 2016). Are my ‘likes’ the reward for agreement with a view floating on the surface that suits another’s preconception rather than a deeper engagement with ideas? Where are the algorithms and metrics that reward us rethinking, changing our minds even, rather than approving our own echo?

For all their benefits, the deep shadows of social media platforms are increasingly apparent, yet it’s taking far too long for Twitter and Facebook, especially, to deliver or enforce a robust ethical framework or act meaningfully on existing policies to quickly and reliably screen out abuse or disinformation. National governments appear at a loss to apply the norms expected of broadcast media, despite these channels’ significant experience of navigating the tensions between ‘free speech’ and ‘hate speech’.

Meanwhile, the profits of online vitriol are not properly taxed and the platform’s income generation model rewards a lucrative trade in the heat and friction of polarisation, weakening and even denaturing the very tissue that holds a culture together.

DOCUMENTARY: PROMOTING A MORE RELATIONAL, PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

The flourishing of an easy trade in bigotry-fuelled conflict online reminds me of Leni Riefenstahl's riposte fifty years after making *Triumph of The Will* (1935), her striking documentary, commissioned by Hitler, introducing him to film audiences and featuring the Nazi Nuremberg rallies of 1934. Riefenstahl maintained that it did not matter what the Nazi speeches she featured were about: 'Whether it was about politics or vegetables or fruit, I couldn't give a damn. ... To me the film was not about politics, it was an event. ...' What does political responsibility mean? And to whom is one responsible? Riefenstahl wanted to make a 'great' film, to hell with the consequences.

Ray Müller's flirtatious rapport and the careful documentary interview technique he used in the making of *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl* (1993) encouraged Riefenstahl to speak out on these issues. In Müller's admirable and long documentary (188 mins), his relational approach revealed more of Riefenstahl than his subject intended. In shorter works, too, the directed camera can 'see', revealing to audiences things that are easily overlooked when *a priori* ideas stand in the way of what is in front of our eyes. The ability to be alive to nuance is essential here, flourishing in documentary's observational modes, if a space can be configured to loosen pre-conceived story structures and open out on other ways of looking.

When shooting *Justine* (Lotus Films, 2013),¹ about a young woman who rarely speaks, I made an 'anti-journalistic' choice to avoid naming the principal character's neurological condition, as I was concerned that if she were introduced in terms of her medical history, it might keep her sealed in a box (an audience's idea of 'neurological disorder' for example) from which she might not escape. This was arguably a strange choice but I was concerned that when most media engages with people with disabilities, the disability or 'condition' is the 'news-worthy' fact. The risk is that such reportage collapses the individual into her diagnosis and eclipses the person herself.

Is a different kind of communication possible through a more relational, participatory approach where stories emerge 'with' and 'alongside' rather than simply 'about' the other? Pioneering Vietnamese video artist Trinh T. Minh-ha describes her aspiration in moving image practice as restoring proximity of the subject and recognising the place of subjectivity:

In the context of power relations, speaking for, about, and on behalf of is very different from speaking with and nearby ... what has to be given up first and foremost is the voice of omniscient knowledge (Hohenberger 2008: 118-119).

Close listening when making *Justine* helped my direction and camerawork be led by shifts in her emotional temperature and small happenings. Configuring this

space brought changes that re-formed the narrative so that a new visual journey emerged, that is more led by Justine's experience and decisions. The 'advanced neurological disorder' and 'autism' labels typically led to a pathology of Justine suggesting that it would be very difficult for her to show empathy – either cognitive or affective. Yet close attention to Justine revealed (and possibly facilitated) her clearly empathic responses recorded on camera in several situations.

Freed of the medical labels, it was easier to observe and film, and on showing a fine-cut to her family, her mother paused to say: 'God. I never thought she would do that,' when observing a sequence in which Justine was able to anticipate other children's needs and take initiative to help them by opening a gate.

Likewise, audiences started to hear and see aspects of Justine that undercut conventional expectations. Justine could start to emerge (I speculate) more on her own terms, rather than those of conventional media interest, that typically frames and reduces her to her 'disabilities'.²



Justine opening a gate: A still from the film, Justine (photograph by Pratāp Rughani)

When storytelling, it's essential to ask: how do the subjects of these stories benefit from their involvement and who else benefits? Despite *Justine's* micro-budget, interest in the film on the educational and film festival screenings circuit generated income. That money went to Justine and supported some leisure interests, so she has seen direct benefits in her life. Payments should be carefully agreed to avoid the dangers of 'cheque-book journalism' but it is also time to offer a new transparency in the financial flows of productions and ensure that the main participants see real rewards.

FINDING AN AUDIENCE

Films such as *Justine* found audiences at film festivals, community screenings and galleries. Leading UK gallery spaces, so recently uninterested in promoting documentaries, are now replete with them as audiences respond to socially-engaged art. Here, the storytelling can be less circumscribed and offer a more open encounter. Media in gallery spaces can experiment with other ways of seeing. A retreat from broadcast and mass media, however, risks reducing work to bourgeois entertainment, ultimately decorative in its setting, whilst mainstream and social media bifurcate into mutually enforcing bubbles.

Even the making of mainstream broadcast documentary still struggles to resist the gravitational pull to exaggerate and heighten differences and to keep attention through ad-breaks – sometimes seriously distorting information in the search for the most ‘compelling’ narrative. Some documentaries tip into becoming more openly partisan and adversarial media. Yet this adversarial posture undermines the potential to find a common ground that can nurture the kind of trust to renew connection through an exploration of difference. That connection can be within tantalising reach since, underneath the culture clashes of ‘identity politics’, groups professing mutual loathing often find that there is much more that they agree on.³

In today’s age of Trumpian tweets, racism (among other hatreds) is brazen and normalised. But Hannah Arendt reminds us that the totalitarian impulse is not the property of a single political complexion (Arendt 1958).

ATTRACTORS

Views are triggered and easily congeal. Why? Professor Peter Coleman, of Columbia University’s Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution, leads a research centre whose studies conclude that the neurology of intractable polarisation is producing a hard-wired response through ‘attractors’ that are hard to shift. Our brain’s amygdala is activated by fear and much of social media’s platform engineering triggers these responses. As Coleman et al. argue (2005):

Attractors, in short, channel mental and behavioural experience into a narrow range of malignant (but coherent) states. Attempting to move the system out of its attractor promotes forces that reinstate the system at its attractor. This means that attempts to change the state of conflict without changing the mechanisms that continually reinstate the conflict are likely to be futile, resulting only in short-term changes. To promote lasting change, it is necessary to change the attractor states of the system. This is no easy feat, since it is tantamount to changing the mechanisms responsible for the system’s dynamics.

Is it possible, however, that with the right support, attractors could be supported to drive virtuous, rather than just vicious circles?

DESIGN FOR DIALOGUE

Journalism's production and editorial guidelines have arguably a bigger sector-wide role to play at this juncture, when under-regulated media grows a culture of advanced polarisation and hate speech flourishes. Facebook's tilt towards 'neo-Nazi shopfronts' is tracked in the Center for Countering Digital Hate's publication *Hatebook* (see counterhate.com/hatebook). Moreover, enforcement of the National Union of Journalists' Code of Conduct⁴ and ethics guidelines, broadcasters' editorial guidelines and regulatory frameworks to map out responsible media spaces is needed (Rughani 2013: 101-105).

Significantly, some small alternatives are emerging from grass-roots local groups such as the community-owned Bristol Cable,⁵ founded in 2014, that re-centres the social context stories live in and return to. Initiatives such as Tortoise Media⁶ embrace 'slow news' as an approach to distil depth from the continuing flow of superficial news updates. Both invite more participatory news values.

Dialogue and listening that privilege the space to reflect and reconsider could lead us to change our minds and escape the 'gravitational pull' of attractors. In my documentary practice, I have been fortunate to be present when people determined to pursue a vision or ideal of reconnection decide to make something better from our divisions. I have seen this unfold in entrenched conflicts, such as at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings of the new South Africa for Channel 4 in 1998; the evolution of a new police service in Northern Ireland in 2004, and among London students from many diverse ethnic backgrounds decrying Islamophobia (2001 to the present).

I have also seen it fail when the conditions for good faith in listening on each side were not developed, for example at the Aboriginal Reconciliation Convention, in Australia, in 1997, when the then-Prime Minister, John Howard, reduced the history of Indigenous genocide to a 'blemish' and hectored his Aboriginal audience with the pride settler Australians feel in their nation-building. There followed an extraordinary moment. With an invisible signal, the bulk of the Aboriginal audience quietly stood, remained listening, then slowly turned their backs on Howard. It was a moment that called for statesmanship with a Prime Minister standing for the wider community beyond their own partisan interests. Instead, Howard became yet more shrill, rattled through his notes and left without discussing or listening to any Aboriginal speakers.⁸

It was a profoundly disappointing and shocking moment but it did not surprise many Indigenous survivors whose dignity in attending remained an unseen, unwanted gift. A recent report indicates that as many as 500 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have died in custody in Australia in the thirty years since a royal commission gave recommendations aimed at preventing Indigenous deaths in the justice system, disfiguring an Australia where black lives have yet to really matter (Allam 2021).

A culture is clearly needed to reinforce a different form of communication that privileges empathy, connection and the development of a deeper confidence to make space for another's experience. In that space of listening, compassion can grow, even in extreme situations.

How to curate spaces and discussions that enable such journeys? What in our communication privileges the softening of conviction and the quieter confidence to doubt and enable another's experience to influence us? Can documentary makers be struck by how the 'storifying' of life can be richer and more interesting than the *a priori* narratives that often deliver journalists and filmmakers to a place of difficulty or conflict? How can the door to the dialogic be opened?

Modelling this approach is key. A recent BBC project, built on research into 'humanbecoming', suggests this useful, tested methodology (Kasriel 2020):

- Ask your speaker to explain their perspective and why they feel so strongly. Listen, without interruption, putting aside judgements, counter-arguments and solutions.
- Summarise the core of what you have heard and check you have understood correctly, including the emotions and texture of their story. This does not mean you have to agree.
- Ask whether they agree with your summary. If not, ask them to explain more.
- Continue with this process till the speaker gives a resounding 'Yes.' They should at this point be likely to listen to your side of the story.

The spirit of this is receptivity rather than agreement. Agreement may not follow. The point is not to agree or persuade through duress but to experience relatedness that may unsettle each other's convictions and open new channels of communication and affect. If receptivity suffuses our listening, answers may emerge, perfumed with similar qualities. NPR broadcaster Krista Tippett, in *The Art of Generous Listening* (2019), explains how her radio series, *On Being*, strives to create understanding for how another thinks. Tippett suggests we look more to 'how' and 'why', rather than 'what' and 'when' as keys to developing dialogue. By shifting our attention we expand the foundations of relatedness to focus on what truly matters, she says, and we can develop 'discernment'. 'The point is not to agree but to come into relationship. What we have in common are our questions.'

Designing for dialogue may begin as a response to political polarisation, but its effects are joyfully unpredictable. Exploring such questions will likely be profoundly inter-disciplinary. For all the advances of the West's Enlightenment, our scholarship risks being imprisoned in its own specialisms. In the face of complex challenges, the weakness of trying to tackle big questions in separate compartments is clear.

Preparing the ground by learning to listen and the creativity of dialogic encounters should lead us to rethink not just why we got here but to imagine something finer.

RESTORATIVE NARRATIVE

Reflecting on many years of documentary practice with an emphasis on production ethics, the central question for me is now: how can the dynamic affordances of interactive and social media be harnessed for a different kind of storytelling, rooted in production practices of deeper listening and a rigorous search for what connects us – what we have in common, rather than the easy reflex of reacting to opposing views? With that commitment to shared community, how can documentary and other media practices engage difference better? Instead of feeding the easy heat of triggering reflex reactions, can storytellers invent media that aims to restore relationship, understanding and connection – a media that truly mediates between us?

What might success look like in this context? As with restorative justice approaches and some forms of mediation, a key focus is on creating the conditions for deeper attention, rather than attempting to cajole others into a surface agreement that may prove counterproductive. A key to unlocking polarised and apparently intractable conflict is a shift towards acceptance of the other. The work of philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas is useful here, especially his insistence on meeting the gaze of the other and the foundational ethics of cultivating this kind of attention (Hand 1989).

Some remarkable examples of the journalism that embodies this approach are collected from the edges of human endurance in the work of the Forgiveness Project⁷ and the work of its founder Marina Cantacuzino. Her essay ‘As mysterious as love’ emphasises the cross-currents of feeling and insight where polarisation and hatred can give way to release (not necessarily forgiveness) in a jagged journey that is ultimately about reconciliation with experience and with oneself: ‘Making peace with a painful event is what allows people to live with hurt and catastrophe, find resolution and move on’ (Cantacuzino 2015: 12). Reconciliatory stories are hard to surface – in situations of trauma even the questions can be very hard to approach. Marian Partington, whose younger sister Lucy was a victim of the serial killers Fred and Rosemary West, eventually came to ask how she could help perpetrators to become free of the pain that led them to cause harm in the first place. Her insight gave direction and the journey of her grief unfolds just the kind of delicate journey whose deeper strength is hard to recognise – or sometimes even to understand – in cultures of oppositional storytelling (Partington 2016).

The fragile beginnings of structured support for a change in approach from media makers may be emerging. In 2013, Images and Voices of Hope developed the genre of restorative narrative ‘proposing that by following the arc of recovery instead of focusing exclusively on traumatizing events, victims and the helplessness

that follows, they could help build capacity in the communities they serve'.⁸ Now merged with the Peace Studio, the initiative offers space for 'reflective practice' to support a shift in awareness to help practitioners configure this newer trajectory in storytelling. The resulting stories can open audiences to our own (sometimes small) restorations with things we may find 'unforgivable'. Stories of reconnected communities become tangible by tilting production ethics to seek narratives that privilege listening, exchange and shared concerns. Stories that chart and document collective commitment to a dynamic of exchange might then lead to reconnection or 'restorative narrative' as a recognised strand of media production. The prize here is not necessarily agreement on an issue between formally polarised people but enough of a convergence of experience for mutual understanding of the other. Indeed, stories of restoration of connection can model that possibility to others. If we see such stories regularly in our media, they become a more tangible possibility.

CONCLUSION: RE-CONCEIVING MEDIA AS ETHICALLY RESPONSIBLE

Can a story production process now emerge that re-conceives media as ethically responsible 'connective tissue' to configure a public space to enable storytellers, subjects and audiences to understand and come into relationship with others' diverging perspectives? Achieving this means letting go of the pretence of *a priori* pseudo-objectivity. In their article 'Racism, hate speech, and social media: A systematic review and critique', Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas (2020: 218) note: 'There is a preponderance of research on racism, hate speech, and social media done by white scholars that rarely acknowledges the positionality of the authors, which risks reinforcing colour-blind ideologies within the field.'

Recognising our 'positionality' by developing a reflexive awareness is a significant move in creating an environment that can reach beyond a single perspective towards a deeper pluralism. This paradox remains a challenge for many media practitioners. Many of us like to think that we are 'impartial' or that we have already escaped the gravitational pull of our own conditioning, when the idea that we are already free of our biases can be the very blinkers that reduce our ability to recognise how our limitations may invisibly structure our thinking and storytelling. The humbling recognition of our limitations and the work that flows in building teams to research broader perspectives can map out a new alchemy in storytelling.

Just as some natural history programming features a 'making of' section that unpacks the technical triumphs and hardships, could a 'story lab' sidebar or section of a restorative article or programme reveal the restorative work that enables the prospect of reconnection and community forged from diverse perspectives? If the medium can become the message, what if the process of creating that media is dedicated to restoring relationships through the light of understanding difference – inventing an avowedly restorative media. What new visions may then flow from these new narratives and the ethics of such a media practice?

NOTES

- ¹ Film (and debate) available online at <https://ethics.arts.ac.uk/>
- ² For an exploration of the approach to storytelling taken here and the foundational ethical questions that underpin this trajectory, see Ethics for making, by Pratâp Rughani (2020). Available online at <https://screenworks.org.uk/archive/volume-10-2/ethics-for-making>
- ³ See <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/nov/17/voters-in-west-divided-more-by-identity-than-issues-survey-finds>, accessed on 26 November 2021
- ⁴ <https://www.nuj.org.uk/about-us/rules-and-guidance/code-of-conduct.html>, accessed on 21 November 2021
- ⁵ <https://thebristolcable.org/>, accessed on 20 November 2021
- ⁶ <https://www.tortoisemedia.com/>, accessed on 25 November 2021
- ⁷ <https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/>, accessed on 29 November 2021
- ⁸ <https://thepeacestudio.org/>, accessed on 27 November 2021

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