

Media Crisis Coverage: To Serve and To Scare¹

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Online publication date: February 26, 2004

Journal of Media Psychology, Volume 9, No. 1, Winter 2004

It is abundantly clear, to even the most casual passing oxymoron, that televised coverage of local and national crises is: necessary yet excessive; compelling but indecent; serves the “public good” while serving the public poorly.

There is a dysfunctional partnership between the media and the public in our increasingly media-centric lives. It is shaky, and unbalanced. Each partner exploits the other, the natural dynamic in all relationships. One is motivated principally by economic rewards, the other principally by entertainment appetites. It’s the dealer-user paradigm. The brute fact is that a dealer can wring rewards from a user with greater dispassion and effectiveness than the user can wring concessions from the dealer. And if the user overdoses on the product, the dealer can always find a replacement user in an entertainment-addicted society.

In times of local or national crisis, though, information needs temporarily trump economic and entertainment needs in the minds of an anxious citizenry, dealers and users alike. This priority reshuffle, however, is fleeting. Simple observation reveals that soon after the initial blush of uncertainty, and after the alarm of an unfolding crisis fades, economics and competition quickly reassert themselves as the principal engines that drive media coverage and focus.

¹ A revision of a Keynote Speech delivered at the Symposium on the Influence of Media on Catastrophe & Everyday Trauma. Worcester Institute on Loss & Trauma. Worcester, Mass. Sept. 24, 2003

After a breath, the media shifts gears from uncovering and providing needed information to flogging *la crise du jour* to keep the public tuned in and mainlining. In this amphetamized dance between the dealer and the user, the media offers the crisis song, inviting the viewing public to dance to the crisis melody the media so seductively orchestrates.

There are potentially dark consequences in this crisis *pas de deux*.

Propelled by a voracious maw of a 24 hour news cycle and the dizzying pace in the entertainmentization of news coverage, the bizarre, the grotesque, and the disturbing increasingly are the prime ingredients of the intellectual gruel served up to viewers of so-called “news” shows. Parading as “breaking news,” “bulletins,” or just the evening news lead-in, our nation’s walking wounded are caught on camera blowing their heads off with shotguns on Los Angeles freeway bridges, or blowing away their wives in Florida cemeteries. Endless repeats show tortured bodies falling or jumping from the enflamed and imploding Twin Towers. Transfixed viewers are (mis)treated to reruns of a fantastical scene of throngs of terrified people running from an impossible, enveloping, cloud of toxic smoke and dust drifting around a corner, like some 1950s electrocharged, ectoplasmic sci-fi monster.

The thin line between gut-wrenching, vital information and a news-sponsored horror show begins its fade to oblivion.

Television is the medium of choice for breaking news for the majority of Americans, according to results of a survey reported online by the Pew Internet & American Life Project (Gough, 2003). More than 54% of respondents in the study said they turn to TV first during a crisis. Over 70% eventually turn to TV at some time after the initial crisis breaks.

Given these impressive numbers, how television handles the images of national crises it sends out to viewers is of concern and, of late, the subject of substantial

criticism. The events and pictures of 9/11 are of particular importance to those concerned about the potentially traumatizing effects of dramatic violence of all sorts, from terrorist bombings through high school massacres, to individual acts of suicide.

Images of death and destruction are routinely replayed endlessly on television screens. Once the orgy of display of these images has exhausted itself of viewer ratings and social reactions, the images are reprocessed into the subject matter of hours of self-criticism by journalists at local or nationally televised round-table discussions, in magazine and newspaper articles, and engage the chattering classes on radio talk shows and call-ins.

In the end, then, everything of the news footage is used but the squeal. The media erupt in *mea culpa* confessionals! Television, in particular, loves to air self-confessionals as much as the NYSE loves to announce reforms. In fact, television seems to have rewritten a 60s mantra: “Be part of the solution AND be part of the problem.”

Grim-voiced, finger-pointing, media watchers have attacked the commercial media, especially television, for gratuitously inflicting psychic damage for the purposes of ratings and advertising rates. People turn on the television to become informed about ongoing crises only to get traumatized for their efforts by gratuitous, assaultive images (Pew, 2001). This endless, visual screed of atrocity and horror leaves a claw print on viewers’ psyches, a print we might rightly christen *media enabled trauma*.

Anecdotal reports and self-report surveys rather consistently conclude that watching terrible images of death and destruction over and over, can produce numerous stress-related clinical symptoms including agitation or depression. Repeated exposure of such horrifying or distressing events has been labeled “retraumatizing” (Spicer-Brooks, 2001).

Media effects of this type seem to happen because the mind reacts to images more emotionally than intellectually. Individuals react with even greater intensity when

viewing images they know or believe are not fiction, but brutal reality (Groebel & Krebs, 1983). This effect is more likely to occur when someone is *directly* exposed to a disaster (personally involved or has friends or loved ones who were personally involved) than when someone is *indirectly* exposed (e.g., witnessed event only on TV) to a disaster. Moreover, likelihood of a reaction being diagnosed as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as opposed to the less severe “posttraumatic distress reaction,” is increased with direct exposure to the crisis event (Pfefferbaum, Pfefferbaum, North, and Neas, 2002).

Additional research in this area also indicates that, whether or not there is a linear relation between number of exposures to mediated images of, say 9/11 events and reported stress symptom severity, also depends on whether experience is *direct* or *indirect*, with only *direct* experience yielding a significant correlation (Ahern, Galea, Resnick, Kilpatrick, Bucuvalas, Gold, and Vlahov, 2002).

Stress Types

Beyond the issue of *direct* or *indirect* experience of a disaster event, are there different stress typologies? In other words, do groups differ in their reactions to crisis coverage? Excluding from our discussion those with personality disorders, when watching TV crisis coverage some people are characteristically more prone to stress than others. A brief reflection on reported reactions to crisis coverage suggests a preliminary typology:

Over-Empathizers: Personality research indicates some people are overly **empathetic**. Their reactions to news footage are comparable to unwanted, psychologically “non-distanced” fright reactions in suspense or horror movies, or to other intense cinematic emotional experiences (Apter, 1992; McCauley, 1998). Similarly, less extreme but nonetheless heightened empathetic reactions to non-fictional violence on television are reportedly connected with adults (Singer, et al., 2004) and with children who function at a high level of trait or state anxiety (Cantor, 1998).

Walking Wounded: Other types of people may also be particularly vulnerable to televised disaster coverage, such as those who chronically circle the event horizon of

clinical depression. These are viewers with defense systems already weakened by other life circumstances who can be easily pushed into the dark abyss by personally or only tangentially relevant crisis events, regardless of how sensitively the images of these events are handled by the media.

Re-visitors: Some people with a susceptibility to cognitive and emotional messages of horror, due to reminiscences of traumas past can, indeed, suffer some form of upset similar to PTSD when using the media to get information about a crisis. People who have gone through riots or earthquakes or flood are examples. So are people who expose themselves to “anniversaries” of national disasters such as 9/11 or the Oklahoma City bombing (Eth, 2002). Therapists in locales where tragic events took place report upsurges in caseloads and aggravated stress symptoms in existing clients, clients who were either *directly* or *indirectly* involved in a tragedy (cf., Lee, Isaac, and Janca, 2002)

More generally then, even in distant locales, far from whatever ground zero we’re talking about, there are always reported increases in stress symptoms by existing patients, another example of *media enabled trauma*.

Looking beyond typologies, it is quite obvious that normal people can experience states of hyper-vigilance and hypersensitivity to noises, tremors, all sorts of unpredictable stimuli, which trigger fears that what happened elsewhere may be happening here, right now; or what happened in the past may be happening again. To this day, people in Los Angeles react with startle responses to heavy trucks passing (“is it an earthquake?”) or sonic booms (“is it a terrorist attack?”). Los Angelenos personally experienced the former in the early 90s; and vicariously shared the latter in 2001. Ten years later, two years later, it seems to make little difference, many Los Angelenos still **react**. For too many, these reactions are “refreshed” each time television revisits these events with anniversary retrospectives. Crisis-related startle reactions are particularly likely given the ongoing, publicly announced threats of new terrorist attacks. (Schuster, et al., 2001).

New Yorkers have fallen under a similar dark shadow of latent emotions as a result of September 11, 2001 (Ahern, Galea, Resnick, Kilpatrick, Bucuvalas, Gold, & Vlahov, 2002; NIMH, 2001). My personal observations lead me to believe that, for many people, at any now-ubiquitous, increasingly generic “ground zero,” the mind and body’s threat response is always just a noise away.

Those who did not experience such emotionally and media-engulfing events personally, do not have to handle this post-trauma susceptibility to ambiguous noises and tremors. However, with events like terrorist attacks and anthrax scares, being geographically far from the point of contact does not afford the protective distance of being away from, say, a flood, a fire, or an earthquake. We all are, or feel we all are vulnerable to terrorist attack so we all are disposed to being a little paranoid. And sometimes paranoia is reality testing.

Some trauma experts, like psychiatrist Dr. J. Hutchinson, argue that, for competitive reasons, television stations direct and format their crisis coverage to engage what’s been labeled the “emergency attention system.” This system involves an intense focus accompanied by fight, flight, or freeze responses. Television stations intentionally fuel this reaction by their coverage, according to Hutchinson, precisely because such coverage “style” raises viewer anxiety. When this drive is engaged, it must be reduced. This guarantees that the viewer will stay tuned after the commercial to get the information needed to reduce the anxiety. (Hutchinson, in Spicer-Brooks, 2001).

Illustrations of such anxiety-inducing gimmicks employed by television stations are:

1. Use of “breaking news” graphics and fear-arousing or attention-getting logos like the headline or banner on the screen screaming “Terrorism in America,”
2. Menacing or militaristic music, and
3. Deploying hot colors and sonorous announcers, narrators, and ominous voice-overs.

All these devices are designed to engage or to create in viewers, fear-piqued attention.

During a crisis, many viewers, particularly those with 24-hour cable news shows, seek out the constant drumbeat of news coverage to stay informed and reduce the stress that accompanies uncertainty. But watching hours of crisis coverage footage can often have the opposite effect. Visual images go directly to the most primitive parts of our psyche, pushing all the fear buttons. Anxiety is elevated. People watch in order to calm themselves. The more they watch, the more they want to watch because the more anxious they feel. And the cycle continues.

It is not simply that stress triggers stress-related physiological reactions but also that stress engages cognitive flights of “what if...” self-stimulation which further exacerbate physiological reactions and push nightmare scenarios onto the mind’s center stage.

Remedies

How can television, during a national or local crisis, be brought to its senses and play the educational and informational role in society that it was conceived of doing over 50 years ago (Greenfield, 1977; Udelson, 1982)? Just as important, how can viewers do their part in de-pathologizing this media-public *pas de deux*?

Perhaps, to insure safe passage, there is one simple concept people can employ when watching a televised crisis unfold. They can “just say no.” By this I mean they can grab the remote and either turn off the television or even go for the electronic tranquilizer...and turn on *Teletubbies*.

For me, this strategy crystallized rather haphazardly when, for hours, I was a wide-eyed captive of television images during the Los Angeles riots in 1992. Television brought a gunfire-riddled street scene into my home. Staring at the television screen during the riot’s Vesuvial hours, I saw my city on fire. For hours I sat or paced the floor in front of the screen, feeling vulnerable and threatened. As my anxiety mounted and

thoughts raced to unwise places, I went to the closet, reached in and unsheathed my pistol from its locked holster, fearing that riotous marauders on the screen would be making their way up to my canyon in the Hollywood Hills. The more I watched, the more upset I became. My temples pounded. Words and images ricocheted off walls of consciousness. Blood pressure rose. I was circling a Defcon 4 anxiety attack.

Finally, literally out of breath, I tore myself away from the television, hurtled outside...

...and went 'through the looking glass.'

The noisy, panicked voices in my head suddenly stopped. There was no gunfire punctuating the night air with its fearsome chorus of cracks and pops. No visible fires, no cacophonous night symphony of the sounds of looting. The night noises were of a natural peace. The stars were bright, the canyon air was fresh, the Hollywood sign was still there, and the mockingbirds were singing.

All the tension drained out of me. Yet, nothing had changed in the world. I was just looking at and listening to a different part of it. At that moment, I understood the power of the visual image as I had never understood it before.

Limitations on Advice

"Turn it off!" It worked for me. But how generally effective is this advice? What research tells us on this issue is that when fear and anxiety lead to uncertainty, the drive for information to help predict, control, and understand our world, is overpowering (Kelly, 1963). The impulse to do something, anything, to reduce risks to oneself or significant others, makes turning on a television or radio virtually irresistible.

Uncertainty and anxiety increase the likelihood that people will tolerate reiteration of what they already know in anticipation of new information about things they don't know, but believe they need to know to take effective action. Thus, telling people to just say no or just turn the dial, or unplug the set in the face of a developing,

uncertain, dangerous crisis, usually falls on ears rendered deaf by desperation and anxiety.

So, here we must consider four questions:

1. Does a “Just say no” Reagan-Era rectitude really work in the throes of a crisis?
2. Does it work as productive advice only when the crisis’s eye has passed and viewers are simply being exposed to updates, reruns of shocking or exciting videotape, and analyses *ad nauseum*?
3. Does it work only when the viewer is convinced of its correctness but has simply lost sight of the advice in his/her elevated, angst-ridden interest?
4. And what if the crisis, a war, or 9-11, or fires, or floods, lasts for days? What if TV stations interrupt their regularly scheduled programming for the live, open-ended, ‘negative celebration’ of the momentous horror, engaging the rapt attention of whole societies? In other words, what if the crisis becomes what Blondheim and Liebes (2002) call a *disaster marathon*. Will this advice work then? How much is enough news and information and how much is too much?

During the cyclorama of crises confronting Americans on a rather disturbingly regular basis, I have observed that increasing numbers of on-camera mental health experts make “turn off the TV” recommendations to viewers. But, there is no reason to offer advice like this if it doesn’t work for most people; if it merely makes the expert feel good offering it.

Crisis Coverage for Viewers: News or Entertainment

Perhaps though, we are all really exposed or closeted crisis junkies, whether or not we’re upset with the crisis of the moment. Nielsen ratings indicate that most people want their crisis coverage hot and heavy, damn the torpedoes! It upsets them like a roller

coaster, but they want to go on anyway because...it takes them out of their ordinary lives and puts them into an adrenaline zone.

A few moments of self-reflection can bring this point home with exquisitely embarrassing pungency. When you are not **in the crisis**, when you're a remote bystander, media crisis coverage is **entertainment**. The "crisis" has become a distinct television genre. Think the early days of the recent Iraq war. According to newspaper reports, movie rentals dropped during the coverage. It was exciting, and no one really *seemed* to be getting hurt. Not even the Iraqis. Think police pursuits, whether in the O.J. slow-chase style, or the teeth-grinding, Popeye Doyle-*French Connection* style. We watch hoping something dramatic will happen. But even if it doesn't, it was fun. Provides great ratings too. (According to a recent article in *Variety*, there is, in the planning stage, even a cable channel devoted exclusively to police chases.)

But, **when you're in it**, when you are a part of the crisis, when you're someone whose house is threatened with going up in flames, or down in an earthquake, or smashed into splinters in a hurricane, or carried away in a flood, when you're in it, crisis coverage is **information gathering**, not entertainment, it is **survival mode**, not **diversion mode**. You want it!

So, we are on the horns of the proverbial dilemma. Those in a crisis want information too much to just say no. Those who are crisis coverage enthusiasts are tuned in to enjoy the ride. Who **will** listen to the "turn it off" advice? Again, I don't know. Maybe only those who want a brief respite before they jump back into the media fray; or maybe a mother who realizes she can't hold the bottle steady in her infant's mouth. Or maybe the college student who finds the tears running down their cheeks yet feels no fear or sadness.

But perhaps the media itself can help.

Media Responsibility

It is with unabashed idealism that I offer a few recommendations to the media:

1. During a crisis, news programs should periodically remind viewers of the symptoms of stress reactions to sustained viewing of crisis footage. They should offer cautionary reminders of how to watch television safely during a crisis. It might take away eyeballs from the station, but it gives the station a lot more heart.

2. News stations should use more verbal and less visual descriptions of horrific or disturbing events. If disturbing videotaped pictures are to be shown, viewers should be warned explicitly about what is in them rather than being given vague, boiler plate warnings about what, for some people, may be traumatizing, graphic footage.

3. Impart information without brutalizing viewer sensibilities. Research already shows us that otherwise potentially upsetting images can be presented as still photography, accompanied by neutral rather than foreboding or inflammatory narration.

4. Shrink the size of the image. Here is another example of when size matters: According to Detenber (1996), **size is important** to emotional response. It is important to babies in perceiving others, and to adults when watching a movie in a theater. Image size positively affects the arousal and dominance dimensions of emotional responses. Size is a primitive heuristic (in animals, for example, who is prey and who is predator, or who is too powerful to safely take on) that influences a range of judgments. Films seen as large images on a screen elicit stronger feelings of arousal than the same films when viewed on small screens displaying small images. Disturbing footage can be presented on a small portion of the screen, picture size demonstrably having a bearing on emotional impact. It can work. We're already adjusted to multiple windows open on a television news screen.

5. At their peril, critics ignore the supreme high wire form of contemporary news casts-- live, unedited news-feeds from the belly of the beast. Anything can happen, and often does. It can be thrilling or shocking. Television news meets Russian Roulette. For both viewers and broadcasters it's a case of "sometimes you win, sometimes you lose."

Or as Clint's *Dirty Harry* might say, "Do you feel lucky, punk? Well, do ya?" Several second-delays of live feeds should be ethically mandatory. Even Harry would agree.

Viewer Responsibility

Media savvy is not a one-way street. How much responsibility do media consumers have for their own emotional health? I believe there are things people must know about themselves and their loved ones, to better use the media in times of social crisis. Here is a Crisis Check List to help viewers deal with crises covered by the media. Collectively, they constitute a small foray into the domain of media literacy.

Crisis Check List

- 1.** Work to understand and periodically monitor how an ongoing crisis-related news event affects you, both as you are watching and after you've turned off the television.
- 2.** Recognize how television pictures affect you differently than information transmitted in print or via radio. Choose which medium suits you best at the moment or as a general personality style.
- 3.** Discriminate between talking to people who help dissipate tension and stress and promote rational discourse and those who reliably aggravate tension and stress and commerce in emotions and worst-case scenarios. Think about this for a moment. You know who they are. Which one are you?
- 4.** If you must watch for hours, don't do it without interruptions. Take "fright breaks." Go outside and listen to the birds or whatever calms you. Center yourself, gauge your realistic reactions and your alarmist reactions, and do some self-talk to put things in a balanced perspective. Only when that is accomplished should you go back and re-immense yourself in the disaster marathon.
- 5.** If you are a parent, monitor your children's reactions in terms of their conversation, their play, their projective expressions such as in games and art, sleep and dreams, eating changes, moods, anything which is a window into their state of mind and feelings. Calculate and apportion their media exposure appropriately.
- 6.** Recognize that, for those around you, you are a role model for coping.

7. Distinguish between a genuine need for updated or clarified news information and a simple fascination or temporary, anxiety-reducing addiction to news-watching.
8. Crisis coverage should not be considered entertainment programming. Rethink your use of television in a time of crisis. Think of it as prescriptive electronic medication. Use it judiciously. Watch for side effects. The sounds and images on the screen are bound to upset you at some level, depending on what is happening, to whom it is happening, and its implications for you in the future.
9. Watching news coverage with others is a way to ensure that any exaggerated grief or fear can be tempered by feedback from others. People who watch alone frequently create a far more horrific reality than is warranted by the facts. They live in their own minds and lose control of their own fears. Do not watch crisis coverage alone for any length of time.

Conclusions

In the end then, the dance is between two partners, media producers and media consumers. Producers have a rather outsized sense of their power to determine what appears on television screens, while consumers have an outsized sense of their impotence to effect change in what appears on their televisions screens. This power imbalance need not abide.

The more consumers of media product understand how crisis news coverage affects their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, the more power consumers have to take the argument to media producers. With greater media savvy, viewers are in the informed position to demand more enlightened procedures from their local and national news sources. They can insist on thoughtful and systemic changes in television news conventions for sensitively presenting the panorama of people grappling with the unexpected, the unimaginable and the unforgettable. Media outlets must listen and act in good faith to accommodate public needs and suggestions.

By the same measure, the consuming public must take responsibility for recognizing that people differ in what they want to see on television when a crisis is engaged; viewers differ in terms of what images and what amount of viewing time they do or do not handle well. One size, one format does not fit all.

In a society of media savvy adults and media potentates, media change has to be a partnership in problem-solving not an exercise in finger-pointing.

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