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Simmel, Social Media and the Debatable Virtues of Not Caring

Edward Brennan
Technological University Dublin, edward.brennan@tudublin.ie

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How can we live with so much information from around the world on a daily basis? How can bare to talk about the nightmares served up by our media? And, how can we manage to see, and yet ignore, other atrocities that are presented? As Keith Tester wrote in 1998, most of us today, can 'witness horror, and feel next to nothing' (86). How has this come about?

Tester argues, however, that this must be understood sociologically. Our ability to witness death, misery and humiliation without being stopped in our tracks is, he insists, the product of a particular set of historic circumstances.

Tester offers that our relationships with media are shaped by new traditions that have taken hold as part of modernity. We have, for over a century, learned to become consumers of, a torrent of death and misery.

The Tradition of Narrativity

We talk about media. We tell stories about what we've seen. We have learned how media tell stories, and how we should relate to them. Managing our life with media is part of the cultural competence of modernity.

Centrally, we have learned that representations come and go. Media exist as flows. Representations of suffering exist within, what Tester calls a 'tradition of narrativity' (1998: 88). Television news is organised around what is timely? What will resonate? What events can be rendered as stories? These principles exemplify the idea of narrativity.

> Narrativity, and the tradition of narrativity in television, means that any given image, indeed any single story of horror, is turned into something which is not important in itself, but which is important only in relation to the other things which have happened today. And this also means that today's news will have to re-stake its claim to newsworthiness tomorrow and that yesterday is continually erased and superseded by today (Tester 1998: 88).

Our media do not illuminate the world consistently or evenly. They work like spotlights. When a new issue or image appears, it displaces its predecessor. Mediated horrors come and go. Like any deep-rooted tradition, we do not announce this. We take it for granted.

Media as Metropolis

To dig deeper into our modern relationship with media, Tester turned to Georg Simmel's exploration of the psychological consequences of the metropolis and the money economy in the nineteenth century.

The money economy, for Simmel, mediates between sets of values and eventually replaces all of them. Values, and individuals, become fungible, replaceable. Our modern experiences of different people, principles and ideas exist within the same sameness (See Gitlin 2007: 39).

The nineteenth century city was a concentration of the money economy. The flattening of money-mediated values, was joining by a further, necessary numbing of our senses. The sheer volume of passing strangers, impressions and sensations present in the metropolis necessitated a disengaged, blasé attitude.

For Tester, television resembles the metropolis. 'Just like the city,' he wrote, 'the television offers so much that our powers of discrimination actually cease to be able to work effectively' (Tester 1998: 90). Faced with the firehose of

ephemeral television representations, we adopt a blasé attitude to survive the overload of sensation (see Tester 1998: 92).

Television has been joined, and long superseded, by other elements of, what Todd Gitlin called, the media torrent (2007). We could argue, nonetheless, that television taught us to be blasé in the face of mediated suffering.

Disposable Emotions

Media, however, never direct society. They are always part of a weave of historic processes. Historically media have served structural, political and psychological needs. They have also served, and shaped, our emotional needs.

Modernisation brought novel privations. The newly privatised, middle class home increased social isolation. Capitalist modernisation created a newly privatised, interiorised sense of self. Following Simmel, the numbing, sensory overload of the city, coupled with the homogenising greyness of the money economy undermined our capacities to see and feel.

These conditions created a thirst for a knowledge of society, for personal validation, and above all, for emotion. A rational, calculating system created a counterpoint in romanticism, and later, sentimentalism. For Gitlin, the grand paradox at the heart of Simmel's thinking is that a society of calculation is 'inhabited by people who need to feel to distract themselves' from the rational discipline that their practical lives depend on. Calculation and reserve create a compensatory demand for emotion, excitement and sensation (Gitlin 2007: 41). The romantic movement, and its inheritor the advertising industry, urge 'us to heed the inner voice of feeling'. The 'individual is above all, his or her feelings' (Gitlin 2007: 41).

But, unrestrained feelings pose a threat to social order, and economic efficiency. Romanticism, as Gitlin put it, had to be domesticated (2007: 41). High drama can exist in our sitting rooms but not in the office, or on the shop floor. Emotions may be experienced keenly but must then be dropped. Feelings must be disposable. And so, sentimentalism dominates (Gitlin 2007: 41). And so, from the earliest novels to Instagram and Netflix today, media have served a newfound social need to feel, but not too much.

There is a deep irony here. Media offer emotional relief from boredom and loneliness, but only in the short-term. Like a drug user with a growing

tolerance, the satisfaction of our craving brings temporary relief, but the underlying conditions is exacerbated. Unrealistic social comparisons make us feel more lonely and less worthy. Spectacle goads our already overloaded senses. The cure adds to the cause. Our hunger for media becomes unlimited (Gitlin 2007: 39).

Alone Together

Metropolitans maintain an emotional distance, or reserve as Simmel describes it, from the multitudes that surround them. This preserves a sense of identity but may also manifest as an indifference or open hostility towards others (Tester 1998: 92).

We could imagine that blasé urbanites, isolated from and indifferent to those around them experience media in isolation. But we know that this is not the case. Media are a mainstay in conversation. Here, Tester proposes a further twist in applying Simmel to media.

The sociable conversation offers a means of connecting with others while maintaining reserve. The aim is not to establish truth, nor to reveal one's self

emotionally. The conversation rather than its content is the purpose and motivation here (Tester 1998: 93).

The sociable conversation then is a way of having one's cake, and eating it. Shallow connections are formed, but reserve is maintained (see Tester 1998: 93). Any declaration of principle, belief or personal essence that cannot be adapted to social, and market, necessity is unwelcome, and quite beside the point. This is echoed more recently by Sherry Turkle where mobile communications similarly provide connection without commitment or vulnerability (Turkle 2011).

The 'tradition of narrativity' domesticates images of insult and injury. Nonetheless, we are not made of stone. Our social and cultural traditions emphasise 'sympathy and concern for suffering' (Tester 1998: 94). There is an expectation of care.

Yet, we can witness violence and cruelty, and feel little or nothing. We may feel that we ought to moved. Tester suggests that we may seek further horrors just to feel anything. We may feel shame at our behaviour, or our lack of feeling. And, here, Tester argues reserve becomes a refuge. We can emotionally withdraw from others and we may even, as he puts it, 'feel a

certain contempt for those who do 'wear their heart on their sleeve' (Tester 1998: 94).

If reserve is a refuge, it is simultaneously a trap. To Tester if we are profoundly moved we are 'unlikely to want, or even be able, to talk about that impact in public relationships'. And so, if we do enter into talk of war, alongside the weather, and last night's sport, emotional authenticity is necessarily muffled. We keep our personal anxiety and alarm to ourselves.

Tester is arguing that, amid social reserve, television can allow 'personal existential concern or public engagement'. But, it cannot allow both at the same time. And so, he concludes, we are confined to 'concern without action or discussion without engagement' (Tester 1998: 95)[1].

Thoughts and Prayers

This anticipates new forms of narrativity and sociable conversation. Can we, for example, be deeply moved by injustice visited on someone else, and still use their plight as profile-building fodder on Twitter?

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[1] We do, of course, need to add the grain of salt to Tester's argument. Effective public actions can and do arise from media representations.

Social media exchanges are impassioned but shallow. They present a less civil, but no less reserved version, of the sociable conversation.

The motor of narrativity is the endless effort to capture audience attention. Issues linger on social media but, like television, they come and go. On social media platforms, attention-seeking behaviour is, literally, encoded in the medium.

To express personal concern through social media we are encouraged to do so in a format that mimics television news. Negativity and outrage drive engagement. Victims and outcast perpetrators provide coordinates for identity, empathy and acceptable hatred. Social media exemplify the modern tradition of narrativity. Protestations of care, thoughts and prayers, fuse narrativity and the sociable conversation.

And here, we arrive at the central problem here, empathy.

Media, Empathy and Toxic Care

Media constantly exhort us to care. But, they encourage a toxic form of caring.

Audiovisual media typically work through psychological identification. To forge an emotional connection, we need to be able to see ourselves or some social type that we can relate to. To empathise with someone is, temporarily, to identify with them. And empathy is not inherently a good thing.

Empathy may allow us to imagine, and feel, what it might possibly be like to be a refugee, to be homeless, to be a victim of oppression. Empathy, however, is not a virtue. It is a limited, and limiting skill.

Empathy cannot bathe the world, no more than media can. Indeed, as Rutger Bregman observes, empathy is exactly like news. It will always illuminate one person or group to the exclusion of others (see Bregman 2021: 217).

Empathy is bound up with identity. We identify and empathise with some groups while castigating others. This readily identifiable in news practices. As David Altheide observed in news coverage of crime, the 'victim frame' became a form of morality. The victim, with whom we identify and empathise, is good. The offender is castigated as sub-human, deserving of our hatred and punishment (2003 :10). The same victim/monster binary persists in social media.

Psychologist, Paul Bloom's research suggests that empathy makes us less forgiving, because we identify with victims, and generalise about enemies. To Bregman, the 'sad truth is that empathy and xenophobia' are 'two sides of the same coin' (2021: 219).

There is something deeply amiss then in the ways that care and concern are mediated. Media practices are based in the modern tradition of narrativity, endless media flows, and an endless battle for attention.

We urgently need ways of communicating care that are effective, that can be sustained, and that have motivations outside of ratings, revenue and individual or group identities.

This becomes all the more pressing in the context of climate and biodiversity collapse. We need to communicate care for the more than human world, for beings that we cannot possibly identify with, or empathise, with.

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