

## Death and the media: an introduction

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Death, as part of a spectacle of violence, is the staple fare of the mass media. But natural death, or dying and mourning as a rite of passage, is almost totally excluded. The representation of death in the mass media therefore has little to do with death in real life. Dying in both news and entertainment has a symbolic function of its own which, in turn, fits perfectly into a symbol system which is designed to maintain status and power.

□ This article tries to explore the rationale of death's representation in the mass media, and in television in particular, on the basis of <sup>the</sup> extremely limited research which has been done in this field. Death as an issue in every person's life is an 'unmentionable' subject in both mass media and in media research, just as it has been marginalised by contemporary Western culture in general.

Western societies, in various degrees, are death-denying. This is particularly true <sup>of</sup> ~~for~~ urban environments, where death occurs in hospitals, where children are 'protected' from sharing the experience of human death and where mortuaries try to disguise the reality of death through heavy make-up and embalming.

□ Yet humans are the only known creatures who bury their dead (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1980, p.533). This fact is of fundamental importance because it expresses our ideas about the uniqueness of human life and destiny. Ritual

burial of the dead is attested from the very dawn of human culture. The provision of food, ornaments and tools in Paleolithic graves implied<sup>s</sup> the belief that the dead continue to exist<sup>i</sup> on one way or another. People throughout history, when still untouched by ~~the~~ Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition<sup>r</sup>, refused to accept death as the definitive end of human life.

□ Awareness of death has had two consequences which are of immense social and psychological importance. The first is ~~the~~ consciousness of time, which is not shared by any other species. It enables humans to draw upon experiences of the past to organise the present and to anticipate future needs. ~~The~~ Consciousness of time has made possible economic and cultural progress, just as the loss of a sense of time accompanies decline. Secondly, anticipation of one's own death presents a profound emotional challenge, repercussions of which can be found in many aspects of social and cultural life. The most significant reaction, however, is in the realm of religion. One of the functions of all religions is to link human mortality to a transcendent, eternal sphere.

□ Such general reflections on death may be necessary to appreciate the death-denying tendencies in Western culture. Among the various paradigm shifts which social scientists are studying, there may be none more profound than the transition from the awareness of death as a centrally defining and unique human reality for both the individual and the community, to the current secularist notion of

death as a disagreeable happening which must be dealt with as quickly and as unobtrusively as possible.

□ It is within this death-denying culture that the symbolic universe of our institutional order locates death.

Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1967, p.101) call this function strategic:

# > A strategic legitimating function of symbolic universes...is the 'location' of death. The experience of the death of others and, subsequently, the anticipation of one's own death posit the marginal situation par excellence for the individual. Needless to elaborate, death also posits the most terrifying threat to the taken-for-granted realities of everyday life. The integration of death within the paramount reality of social existence is, therefore, of the greatest importance for any institutional order. This legitimization of death is, consequently, one of the most important fruits of symbolic universes...All legitimations of death must carry out the same essential task - they must enable the individual to go on living in society after the death of significant others and to anticipate his own death with, at the very least, terror sufficiently mitigated so as not to paralyze the continued performance of the routines of everyday life. It may be readily seen that such legitimization is difficult to achieve short of integrating the phenomenon of death within a symbolic universe.

# > It should be noted that every legitimising function in a symbolic universe has its delegitimising effects. Where death may be 'located' in symbolic representation includes, at the same time, where and how it may not appear, namely, as a natural end of everybody's physical life.

# > How children learn about death

A child's first exposure to and experience of death is considered an important benchmark in its development. For many children it is the death of a pet rather than of a person <sup>with</sup> whom <sup>the child</sup> has affective links which establishes

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that experience, which raises other problems that are beyond the scope of this article. There are strong pointers, however, that the symbolic system of our mass media provides an early introduction and a progressive socialisation into the meaning of death in society.

□ Timothy E. Moore and Reet Mae (1987) examined 49 children's books <sup>which dealt with</sup> ~~on their treatment of~~ death. The books were published between 1970 and 1983, and were intended for children between the ages of ten and fourteen. All the books were fictional, and contained clearly identifiable central characters. Sixty deaths were portrayed in the 49 books. Almost half of the deceased were mature adults (43%), followed by deaths of children (25%), young adults (17%) and, surprisingly, the elderly (15%). Moore and Mae

comment:

# 7 1/2 / 8 } This pattern is at variance with actual death statistics in North America, where well over half the deaths in any given year are of people aged 65 or older. Yet in these books the elderly were conspicuously absent. Such symbolic annihilation has been well documented in studies of the elderly on television... but it is surprising to find it in literature whose theme is death. Mortality rates are lowest at ages five through fourteen...yet 25 percent of the deaths in these books were of children in this age range. Children who read this literature thus are provided with a much exaggerated evaluation of the likelihood of their own deaths and those of their peers and parents, while the very realistic expectation that elderly people of their acquaintance will die is minimized. (Moore and Mae, 1987, pp.59-60).

# Murder accounts for 20% of all deaths in the 49 children's books. Likewise, accidents and suicides as causes of death are dramatically high.

□ Many deaths portrayed are highly improbable, and the

stories surrounding the disposal of corpses exceedingly  
bizarre:

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In [the book] Up to low, for example, a girl whose dying father has run away finally finds him lying inside a coffin. 'He had made his own coffin and then climbed into it. He was trying to die'.... The girl and her father approach a kind of reconciliation over the edge of the coffin. After he dies, the daughter and her boyfriend attempt to take the body home by balancing the coffin on the stern of a boat. A hailstorm ensues, and the children end up in the water alongside the coffin: )

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'Mean Hughie was floating as nice as pie inside his coffin. Each time the oars pulled, his head would hit the end of the coffin a little bit. It wasn't funny. I wouldn't say it was funny. But it wasn't sad or horrible either. It was just kind of peaceful and restful looking...' (Moore and Mae, 1987, p.59).

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There are no mourning rituals at all in sixteen of the books, and only 22 of the 60 dead persons got a funeral; eighteen were interned. There was little grieving at the actual occurrence of death. When grief was expressed, gender stereotypes applied: 53% grieving males as against 83% females.

□ As to death's meaning for life, Moore and Mae conclude (p.58):

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In most of the books (63%), a faith or philosophy of life was not described. Ideological expressions, when they were present, most often took the form of queries about the meaning of life and death. Death was portrayed as final and complete in 37 of the books; in 11 books death was portrayed as part of nature's cycle.

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As far as we know no such detailed study of the portrayal of death has been carried out in other media designed for children. However, the cultural indicator programme of the Annenberg School of Communications (University of

Pennsylvania) under Prof. George Gerbner yields important clues. Using the data from the school's Violence Profile, Gerbner writes: 'Violence' rules the symbolic world of television. It occurs at an average 10-year rate of 5 violent incidents per hour in prime time and 18 per hour in weekend daytime children's programming - a triple dose'.

(Gerbner 1980, p.67).

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← The symbolic structure of death is mainly built around television fiction and drama, that is, the invented stories constructed mainly to entertain us. In this world the mortality of human beings is not to be shown. In these films, therefore, 'practically no one ever dies a natural death' (Gerbner, 1980, p.66). Instead, death has what Gerbner calls a 'stigmatic character' (ibid.). A stigma is a mark of shame or disgrace (in everyday language use). Stigmatised death is death which should not exist, and if it does, it exists for people who also ultimately should not exist, i.e. who need to be punished by annihilation. 'Dying on television is a violent retribution for weakness, sin, or other flaw in character or status. It is part of the social typing and control functions of centralized cultural production'. (Gerbner, 1980, p.69).

1. The following section is largely based on the findings of George Gerbner as presented in his seminal article (1980). Although the data are now over ten years old they are likely to apply to the current situation of television violence. The author also gratefully acknowledges many important insights on the theme from Prof. Gerbner's article (1980) and from some of his other publications.

□ How frequent is violent death on prime-time television in the US? It is literally commonplace. Of the nearly 4,000 fictional characters which Gerbner and his associates studies<sup>d</sup> between 1969 and 1978, 63% were involved in some violence. For every ten perpetrators of violence there were twelve victims, and for every ten persons killed there were nineteen killers. Many more characters were thus involved in killing than the number of victims would indicate.

# > According to Gerbner (p.66):

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# > Violent death...befalls 5 percent of all prime time dramatic characters every week, with about twice as many killers (many of whom also get killed) stalking the world of prime time. The symbolic function of death in the world of television is thus embedded in its structure of violence, which is essentially a show of force, the ritualistic demonstration of power.

# > Violence as a demonstration of power has been measured by relating the percentage of perpetrators of violence to the percentage of victims in each social group. These figures constitute a pecking order of mayhem and killing as well as a hierarchy of risks as to who in US television drama is likely to become a victim.

□ The heroes of prime-time TV drama, 'good', young, white American males are more likely to be killers than killed. They kill in a 'good' cause, and have the power to kill, being the most powerful characters in TV fiction. Women who kill tend to be foreign women (twenty killers for every ten killed) or 'bad' women (seventeen killers for over ten victims). Next in line are middle-aged women (sixteen

# > killers for every ten killed):

□ Thus women who tend to kill, kill much less than

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men, have relatively more lethal power when they are foreign, evil, or past the romantic-lead age, than when they are 'good', American, young, and white, as is the case with men. Their killing is more likely to be shown as unjust, irrational, and 'alien' than is killing by men. (Gerbner, 1980, p.69).

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At the very bottom of this hierarchy of risks are old women: if they are subjected to violence they normally get killed. 'Good' women are also greatly at risk (16 victims for every ten killers). Likewise, lower-class men and women, and old men, have little chance of surviving violent

# V incidents:

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Lowest on the dramatic scale are women, lower class, and old people. Of the 20 most victimized groups (both total violence and killing), all but three are women.

Old women are at the bottom of the heap of both the battered and the killed. 'Good' women are among the characters most likely to be both general and fatal victims of violence rather than the perpetrators. 'Good' men have power as indicated by their heading up the killer-killed list; 'good' women, on the other hand, end up near the bottom of the power hierarchy. (Gerbner, 1980, p.69).

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Or, to put it at its most dramatic: in US television fiction, the 'good' male kills, the 'good' female gets killed.

□ What does ~~the~~ exposure to such type<sup>s</sup> of violent death do to television viewers? Gerbner's research has found that heavy viewers in all social groups, yet predominant<sup>ly</sup> in lower social classes, derive a heightened sense of danger, insecurity and mistrust. They fear the 'mean world' out there and feel the need for a strong protector. Heavy viewers tend to be more dependent on authorities and more inclined to justify the use of force. The symbolic

functions of dying as presented by US television is part of the anxiety syndrome, 'contributing not only to a structure of power, but also to the irrational dread of dying and thus to diminished vitality and self-direction in life' (Gerbner, 1980, p.70).

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### Death in the news

Death occurs in the news in many shapes and guises. There are the serene death notices of the powerful, rich and famous, followed by obituaries whose length usually indicates the importance of the person. Death occurs in the stories of terrorists and freedom fighters and in the counter measures of the State. They are about the politics of death, yet are rarely treated as such. Death occurs through 'accidents' or natural disasters, big and small, many of which defy or are denied rational explanations. Wars, finally, are mass killers. Then the media engage in 'body counts'.

□ Death notices and obituaries are primarily the prerogative of those in 'Who's who' lists - mostly men. However, even those with modest status and power, the 'nobodies' throughout their lives, suddenly become 'somebody' when their lives flicker out, provided they were part of a community of interest. Paid death notices (in memoriam) fill the advertising pages of some European and many Asian and African countries, and are a substantial source of revenue for the press. One of the most popular programmes of Radio Uganda is a daily evening broadcast of persons who have died, submitted by friends or relatives at

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a modest cost. It is the most egalitarian treatment of death by the mass media which I have come across.

□ Politically motivated violence and death have become important issues in the communication debate in the last ten to fifteen years, particularly in Britain. Schmid and de Graaf (1982) uphold the thesis that terrorism is in itself an act of communication. Terrorists, kidnappers, hijackers and, above all, freedom fighters usually convey two principal messages, namely that they are fighting the structural system of State violence with violence from below and that the mass media themselves are part of the oppressive system. Schlesinger, Murdock and Elliott (1983) reject the view that publicity supports terrorists and should therefore be censored. They reject the simplistic view of television as a 'conduit medium' for official views, but argue for open programmes, in which the assumptions of the official perspective can be interrogated and contested and in which other perspectives can be presented.

□ Media coverage of violence and death in South Africa has, until very recently, taken place on discourses that associated white (State) violence with the maintenance of law and order, and black violence with 'black-on-black' killing. Fair and Astroff (1991) have shown how news coverage of apartheid has consistently legitimated State violence and thus, at least indirectly, justified the killing of blacks.

□ Death by 'accident' or 'natural disaster' is also part

of the news, yet the scenario of these reports is tightly scripted. News out of Africa: Biafra to Band Aid (1986) and the British Channel Four report 'Consuming Hunger' describe the callousness of television institutions when dealing with mass death in far away countries. In an article entitled 'Whose lives count: TV coverage of national disasters', W. C. Adams maintains that 'Massive loss of life is so difficult to fathom that there may be some sort of automatic psychological logarithm at work' (Adam, 1986, p.117). He then sums up his and other researchers' 'rule of thumb' in dealing with distant natural disasters. The three most potent factors are: '(a) number of U.S. tourists (i.e., cultural proximity and social interests), (b) logarithm of estimated disaster deaths (i.e./ severity of the news event, modified by a logarithmic scale), and (c) distance from New York City (i.e./ geographical proximity).' (Adam, 1986, p.119).

□ Another curious tendency of the mass media is that they take accidents and hazards for granted. How many people are killed in fires each year, or in car accidents, or by toxic poisoning? While single incidents are part of news reports, the mass media tell little or nothing about the risks of such continuing hazards. Singer and Endreny (1987, p.215) argue that 'the annual mortality associated with a hazard is the minimum information needed in order to form some conception of the size of the risk it poses'. Yet, as their research shows, information about the risk of death in such hazards is only reported arbitrarily.

□ Apart from famine, the real mass killers of this century are genocide and war. The mass media's record <sup>in</sup> dealing with genocide is at best spurious. As this journal remarked recently, 'One of the most extraordinary aspects of genocide is the slowness or even reluctance of the mass media to report them - from the Holocaust to Burundi, from Kampuchea to Iraq and East Timor' (Media Development ~~1992~~ p.1.). Notwithstanding recent reporting on 'ethnic cleansing' in former Yugoslavia and on the repression of the Kurds in Iraq, one wonders whether a similar rule of thumb might apply to genocide in 'far away places' as quoted above on natural disasters. Washington Post columnist Richard Cohen identified three criteria for genocide to attract the American public: 'the victims must be seen as innocent, they must have an American constituency, and the United States must be perceived as having some leverage' (in Fein, 1992, p.9).

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□ But William Shawcross refers to another problem: journalists cannot cope easily with the horror of mass death:

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It was some time before many reporters came to accept that terrible events were taking place in Cambodia. Just as few people had wished to believe in the elimination of the Jews until the evidence was thrust before them, so many people wished not to believe that atrocities were taking place in Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge takeover...Far from eagerly seeking...evidence of Khmer Rouge atrocities, they shrank from it. (Shawcross, 1984, pp.52-53).

# > Were there similar inhibitions in journalists when faced with mass death in theatres of war? Hardly. Other constraints are at work in times of war. The rapidly

growing literature on the mass media and the war in the Persian Gulf has turned into a tense political debate with few positive suggestions <sup>for</sup> a new ethical agenda on war itself and on the death of both soldiers and civilians (see Communication Research Trends 1992 for a review of the literature). What is clear, however, is that those in charge of technical and psychological warfare in the Persian Gulf wanted, and managed, to exclude a direct encounter with death: no body count of (enemy) soldiers killed, no evidence of civilian deaths, and no black bags unloaded from aircrafts to be shown.

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~~Conclusion~~  
A broader cultural perspective

This is merely a preliminary survey and an inevitably superficial introduction to the theme of death in the mass media. It has left many aspects unexplored, such as the portrayal of death in non-Western media, death in the history of cinematography, the almost total exclusion of death from advertising and commercials, the strange fascination of television with hospital stories, replete with doctors and nurses, and the approach of religious broadcasters to the theme of suffering and dying.

□ Probably the most important task of future research on mass media and death is to place the theme in a broader cultural perspective. The vital question is the interpretive meaning that both journalists and TV executives and audiences place upon the treatment and <sup>por</sup> ~~portrayal~~ of death. Classical drama - from the Greeks to Shakespeare - have treated violent death as a tragedy,

sometimes as a fatalistic purge of evil in society but at other times, more hopefully, 'in terms of the redemptive value of suffering in tragedy' (Communication Research Trends 1984, p.8.). This broad cultural perspective will be taken up in a book on Communication and culture in war and peace (Roach, forthcoming).

#  The urgency of such research is underlined by the fact that this is the century of the Holocaust, the century of mass starvation and infants' death, and a century of seemingly never/ending genocides and wars. It all fits into the general frame of the Western value system, expressed and reinforced by the mass media, that life on earth is cheap, that it can be disposed of easily, and that life is annihilated according to specific patterns related to status and power.

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