

Television journalism and violent crime, or about a decisive “untold”

Francisco Rui Cádima

Abstract

This paper aims to reflect upon a relatively new development in Portuguese media, namely, to focus on, in particular, television news and its focus on criminal acts that have sensational effects on the greater general public, especially at a time when Portugal is steeped in an economic crisis and a crisis in values that is considered to be the deepest since the country returned to democracy. The article endeavors to contextualize the issue in theoretical terms and also in the national context, discussing methodologies and the practices of journalistic frameworks that will contribute to overcoming this type of tabloid treatment so that the media will have a preventive action simultaneously with its information strategy.

Keywords:

Journalism. Television. Violence. Prevention. Scrutiny.

1 Introduction

“Violent movies increase the frequency of aggressive behaviors _ be it physical or verbal_ in children from nine to fourteen years of age”

Marcel Frydman

“The lack of sense in things make me smile in complaisance. Certainly everything must be what it is.”

Clarice Lispector

The Summer of 2008, in particular the month of August, was marked in Portugal by a growing crime rate which was naturally echoed by the media. The cataract of incidents, some of enormous severity, was matter-of-factly the object of a broad social debate and criticism, above all regarding the potential “mimetic factor” generated by the very means of social communication.

As we have been defending, stereotyped violence in the media does not transmit violence to society in the way that many times one is led to believe. To accuse the media of being the “main” instigators of violence is to delude the problem. The roots of violence have to be found in more complex contexts of society, yet this should not

Francisco Rui Cádima | frcadima@gmail.com

Professor Associado com Agregação do Departamento de Ciências da Comunicação da FCSH - Universidade Nova de Lisboa. Áreas de Cinema e Televisão; e de Novos Media. Coordenador do Curso de Licenciatura e Membro da Comissão Executiva do mesmo DCC-FCSH-UNL.

keep us from making a necessary analysis of the media practices themselves.

This communication intends to make a brief reflection on the role of television in the context of violent crimes in the media, in an attempt to demonstrate that, as an institution of socialization, creator of social link, television inevitably has a sensitive role, be it in the collective internalization of the feeling of insecurity in face of violence, or in the mimicking of aggressive behaviors, for which the television information management needs, most particularly in this domain, to be contemplated by editorial practices strongly anchored in a specific and interdisciplinary technical-scientific body of knowledge about the subject matter. It is also necessary to perceive, as Gérard Leblanc (1987) said, that if this is not done, if crime is transformed in mere *fait-divers*, with television newscast opening honors, then it is doing nothing but to self-legitimize, by omission, the government and the government's political party, in this case decreasing or even nullifying the decisive public interest in a debate that is key for the future of the country and for the upcoming generations.

2 Main Theses and Theoretical Framework

Investigation in this field is naturally complex and has provided different points of view throughout the last decades, as well as some apparently contradictory nuances. If Shakespeare was violent, if violent is what's real, the truth

of the matter is that the current media is ever closer to the model of what is real, however projecting above all its "tactile" glimpse _ which is a blind glimpse _ and not so much reflexive or inquiring, as presumed by the media's social accountability and deontology, assigned in the plane of journalistic practices.

As we have defended in several previously published papers, stereotyped violence in the media does not transmit violence to society in the way that many times it is intended to make believe. To accuse the media of being the "only" instiller of violence is to delude the problem.

The roots of violence, therefore, have to be found in more complex contexts of society and, thus, in the very media-related practices. As there is no doubt whatsoever that the media constructs representations and "recycles" that which is real with certain impacts and social repercussions. This is based on an elementary principle, as Miguel Rodrigo recalls, in reference to Norberto Elias, that both nature (what is instinctive and innate) as well as culture (what is learned and socialized) intervene in violent behaviors. In the current context of media studies and in view of the status of this issue in communication sciences, the author also acknowledges the contradictory character and the lack of consensus in the scientific community regarding the social impacts of violence on television:

No hay, pues, acuerdo en si la violencia en televisión produce mayor violencia en los individuos

y en la sociedad. Si bien no hay investigadores que nieguen la influencia de los medios, lo que no está claro es en qué grado la ejercen. Algunos autores apuntan que la influencia puede ser muy importante, mientras que otros discrepan en este punto. El planteamiento que hace algún autor es que, aunque la influencia sea mínima, hasta qué punto el hecho de que pueda afectar a muy pocas personas no deja de tener graves consecuencias (RODRIGO et al., 2008).

Nevertheless, it is of fundamental importance to know the media dimension of the problem and, above all, the progress of its epistemological condition. One cannot have the illusion that nominatedly violent images on television are also potencializing factors of aggressive responses and are, therefore, a way of learning aggressive behaviors.

Precisely in the 1960's, an European trial conducted by André Glucksmann (1966) defended that a statistical correlation between juvenile delinquency and the mass diffusion techniques would be somewhat risky as, according to the sociological postulates, it was not acceptable to establish a precise direct relationship between the influence of television and the individuals' divergent or diverting behaviors.

However, one of the reference scientific trials in the 1980's, which integrated an important investigation program about violence in North-American television, discussed the possible causal relationship between the exposure to acts of violence on television and aggressive conduct, concluding that the latter was only observed in

youngsters who were predisposed to be aggressive and only under certain circumstances. "It is acknowledged also that both the frequent visual exposure to acts of violence as well as to violent or aggressive conduct may be the joint result of yet another common source." (p. 145). James Halloran (1981) referred that this trial confirmed, in a certain way, the data obtained in his trials conducted in Great Britain:

"This and other trials have led us to declare that it has not been sufficiently demonstrated that television (or other means of communication) can be regarded as a cause or even as an important contributing factor to any form of violent conduct" and concluded: "This should not come as a surprise to us, what should surprise us is the persistence with which investigators continue to search for cause-effect relationships. Actually, in a strict sense, we should not ask ourselves what the effect of television is. We hardly ever ask such questions about other institutions such as family, religion or education" (p. 145).

According to Berkowitz (*apud* VALA et al., 2000), as per his theory on impulsive or reactive aggression, "aggression is most probably verified when, in addition to a negative internal disposition, there is an association of aggressive indications (objects related to aggression) in the external or internal environment" (p. 23). Thus, for example, violent movies would work as one such aggressive indication. Furthermore, according to Berkowitz, aggressive movies might work as "activators" of "action projects", with an influence on behavior.

Along the same line, Gerbner (1989) explained the long-term effects of exposure to violence

recorded on film and several authors coincide in the propensity for the assimilation of violence models, above all by youngsters who are social misfits, even if such aggressive behaviors are to be seen at a much later date. To George Gerbner there is another aspect which shall deserve all the attention and which has to do with the effects of violent images, when he considers that the regularity with which we become in contact, through television or the cinema, with the image of a threatening and dangerous world, is reflected in ourselves in a negative way, as it provokes anxiety or even fear and insecurity regarding “the other”.

Another dimension of the problem is the concern that the possibility of prolonged exposure to violent images may induce contradictory effects: on the one hand, greater tolerance to violence by spectators in general, which may generate an effect of triviality; but, on the other hand, paradoxically, an effect of fear for the scattered social violence and consequently the legitimization of the control image of the police authority as a security response. When seen through the lens of Psychology, or even Psychoanalysis, we would have to conclude with Tisseron (2004, p. 132) that

The primary need of any image-related education is to teach that we should protect ourselves from any trauma resulting therefrom, with the disastrous consequences that we evoke. For that, the best thing to do is to heal ourselves from our hidden traumas in order to avoid the risk that some image may awaken monsters without our knowing.

Of course the effects of violent images are always fearful ones. As Serge Tisseron says in his book, prior to the investigation developed in this context there was the perception that violent images were only dangerous if they could awaken old “occult experiences”, yet something changed in his perception:

After having finished it, I think they are dangerous also for the power of intensifying regressive phenomena in the groups. This may have important consequences IF the groups are united in action as a privileged means of reducing the stresses that arise. It is true, on the other hand, that this will not occur if the groups organize themselves around playful imitation and verbal symbolization. Swift wrote, long ago, that there are two ways of fighting head lice in poor girls' hair. One can shave off their hair, but one can also fight against poverty. The governments which, in face of televised violence, speak of nothing but censorship, are like those Who, in Swift's story, dreamed about having all girls' hair cut off. It continues to be the story of the scissors (TISSERON, 2004, p. 141).

3 Portuguese case: trials

In Portugal there are basically two reference trials on this topic, both promoted at the time by AACCS – *Alta Autoridade para a Comunicação Social* (Higher Authority for Social Communication). One is more recent, though dated the year 2000, the title of which is “Assessment of Violence on Portuguese Television”, and the other, prior to 1993, generically entitled “The Portuguese and Violence in the Means of Social Communication”, this being basically

an “opinion-based survey” about violence in the Portuguese media.

The trial coordinated by professor Jorge Vala (2000) was based on the program schedule and information of mainstream channels in 1997 and was aimed at assessing not so much the effects of television but, above all, the degree of violence in the television shows in general, to characterize the violence broadcasted and to make a comparison between channels in regards to the degree of violence and to its context. The ultimate goal, as said in the trial presentation, being to contribute for a “more responsible” television programming and for “more active and critical audiences”. And as was said in the introduction of the reference trial:

Many are the surveys which reveal that violence on television is an important source from which to learn aggressive behaviors; it constitutes a privileged way of broadcasting the standard character of such behaviors; it contributes to a desensitization to violence and its consequences; and facilitates a paranoid representation of the world _ a world in which it is not possible to trust one another, in which the possibility of being victimized is high and in which the use of force is justified”. The authors of the trial acknowledged the fact that they did not exaggerate “the role of television in learning aggressive behaviors or in their social standard character, in the desensitization to everyday violence or in the construction of fear and the feeling of insecurity; nor do we ignore the factors that the survey has highlighted as being moderating factors of the effects of broadcasting violence through television. This is but one of the institutions of socialization and social regulation (VALA, 2000, p. 15).

Relatively to the conclusions declared at the time about the information programs, trying to

make an overall characterization of violence in the information, the trial coordinated by Jorge Vala analyzed 225 television programs (total 84 hours of programming, the majority being news programs). In the overall sample 785 violent sequences were recorded, the violent images (44% of the violent sequences recorded) being mainly related to physical violence. Vala observes that in this type of program the severity of the violent acts refers “to the maximum degree of violence observed in a violent sequence, visually shown or described. It was observed that 53% of the violent sequences have severe physical or psychological consequences (p. 193).

Another interesting piece of data is to verify that, within one hour of television broadcasting, each viewer observed nine sequences of violence either described or represented through images, 38% of which include visualization of or verbal reference to deaths. In terms of “density” (percentage of the program time occupied with violent interactions), 6% of the information broadcasting time is occupied with violent sequences, an amount identical to that of fiction. Yet probably the most unexpected percentage value is the one concerning the general news programs: 74% of such blocks include at least one violent interaction, with a density of 10% of the total block.

Finally, the trial reports that the frequency of severe violent acts is greater in the informative programs than in recreational shows or commercials, and concludes:

If one takes into account this indicator alone, it can be said that recreational shows and advertising commercials, upon having contingent indirect effects on their viewers, shall do so at the level of aggression learning, whereas information programs may have more effects at the level of fear or of a paranoid representation of the world (VALA, 2000, p. 194).

It is very interesting to compare the conclusions of this trial with the results of the opinion-based survey also promoted by the Higher Authority for Social Communication (1993) a few years earlier. Media-broadcasted violence was divided into three typological groups, namely:

- «factual violence», that which comes closer to «real» violence, and which emerged above all defined as a description or disclosure of actual violent facts
- «violence of detail», also with a strong connection with reality, yet with an evident concern about detailing the violent act, clearly aiming to shock the viewer/reader
- «gratuitous violence », without implying a veracious basis, and which emerges characterized as a communication of violence for violence, that is, without a minimally logical and credible basis to justify the acts of violence underlying the action (p. 89).

In terms of whether they accepted or not the broadcasting of these types of violence, the interviewees basically manifested opinions of rejection, be it regarding the “violence of detail”:

- acceptance conditioned to its broadcasting, based on time schedules and on pre-exhibition announcements, with the basic purpose of protecting the more sensitive segments of the population;

- rejection of its broadcasting, only in specific cases, and when one believes that the detailing of violent facts only has to do with morbid or sadistic notions (AACS, 1993, p. 90).

Or regarding “gratuitous violence”:

- acceptance of its broadcasting when only interpreted as a possible form of entertainment (television fiction) however duly contextualized for the correct target;
- total rejection of its broadcasting when, pretending to have an actual basis, ends up surrendering to markedly commercial interests to the detriment of a rigor strategy (information case) (AACS, 1993, p. 90).

The interviewees underlined what they considered to be “incorrect aspects” of violence in the media:

- the lack of time criteria for the broadcasting of violence (in the case of television);
- the inexistence of prior warnings as to the showing of (extreme) violence situations (above all in the case of television information);
- the exaggeration in the intensity with which a certain topic is presented (with, at least, one violence component), encouraging a gradual lack of interest or estrangement in face of it;
- The lack of a more in-depth interpretation of the causes or origins of the violence phenomenon (in the case of information media in general)
- The proliferation of cases in which one chooses the (commercial) impact given to a piece of news in detriment of safeguarding credibility or public interest (above all in the case of general information media);
- Some abuse in the broadcasting of (entertainment) programs, excessively based on «gratuitous» violence (in the case of television fiction) (AACS, 1993, p. 91).

Regarding the question about the need for an organism or institution whose mission would be to regulate violence shown in the media, the answers were quite curious in the conclusive synthesis. Only when inquired directly about the subject, the citizens tend to accept the existence of such an organism, but provided that

It were representative of anonymous citizens, that is, without any connection to the spheres of power (political, economic, etc.)” and “operated at the level of opinion, of pressure over the media, that is, without prohibitive power so as not to be mistaken for another type of censorship (AACS, 1993, p. 93).

4 Toward a criticism of the media discourse and practices regarding violence

Still in the Portuguese case, and with reference to this more intense period in terms of newscast in the summer of 2008, following the public statements by the person in charge of the Security and Criminality Coordination Office, Leonel Carvalho, who considered, in his declarations to TSF radio, that the media coverage of the burglaries could be the origin of the growing rate of such crimes, fostering the “feeling of insecurity in people”, the daily news program would then go deeper into the issue and even announced that “news about burglaries do not increase crime rate”, saying that “ the recent growth in the number of news about burglaries does not foster the increase in crime rate, as defended by social communication professors, even though responsibilities are assigned to

the media in the current perception of greater insecurity in the country” (NOTÍCIAS, 2008).

The truth of the matter is that the issue is not as simple as that. Putting aside what has been presented above in the scope of the theoretical context, it is evident that the mimetic effects of the media have proven consequences. There are, so to speak, short-term mimetic effects of violence, and there are others that are rooted, that are long-lasting and fundamentally structural, more so than conjunctural. There is also another issue which leads to the study of media practices, trying to figure out in what way its social role and its “power” might be reoriented towards preventive and dissuasive effects more than to a criminal “postal ticket”, and earlier on so as to prevent the misuse of the media which sentences them to have “multiplying” and amplifying effects of the phenomena condemned by society.

This topic begins to be thus contextualized. The media don’t speak, that is, either they speak little or they speak evil, de-contextualize, dramatize, when they declare that which is happening. Social, political and judicial contexts pertaining to violent crime have not had the space they obviously need in the lineup of television news programs and in the media agenda, namely, issues such as: a) school decadence and degradation and school drop-out rate; b) de-structuring of families vs. growth and education of youngsters at risk; c) social discrimination/marginalization of

social boroughs; d) inexistence of a prevention and social and/or technological inclusion system for youngsters at risk; etc., etc.; these are typically topics that do not find their due contextualization in the journalistic field. As a Portuguese researcher says (BRANDÃO, 2010, p. 41), in the opening of news programs “the shocking news about catastrophes and accidents” are predominant, as well as topics which prove the growing sensationalist trend of television information, in search of conquering greater audiences”. This researcher also points to the fact that television information must subtract the current trends which privilege either dramatization and the “shocking image”, or form, over content: “the trend of the market good and the spectacle to overlap the social good; the trend to dramatize the effects over the analysis of their causes; the trend of the growing dramatization of information which has replaced its contextualization[....]” (BRANDÃO, 2010, p. 36).

About the first topic referred to_ the School _, which is key in this problem, one has reached the truly paradoxical point of verifying that the Portuguese political leaders are the ones who anticipate themselves to the media to realize that which is highly disturbing and which has a very harmful effect socially speaking _ the degradation of public school in the country’s capital. Here is the speech by one of those in charge of the Lisbon Municipal Chamber (CML), on June 2, 2008 (Sol online) _ Manuel Salgado

(architect and city council member for Urban Planning at the Lisbon Chamber):

Lisbon is the most beautiful city in the world, yet it has the worst schools in the country [...] the recovery of our schools is one of the priorities for [...] the Lisbon Chamber and is integrated in the group of interventions for which the autarchy has prepared a loan request from the European Investment Bank (LISBOA, 2008).

On his side, António Costa (2008), President of CML stated: “Lisbon currently has the most degraded educational park in the country and it almost a “criminal act” that the right-wing managements of CML have let things reach this point”. And still: “The state of schools is catastrophic”. Finally, it was José Sócrates himself (SÓCRATES, 2008), Prime-Minister of Portugal, who acknowledged the state of the national schools: “We want to build schools of our own time (...) the feeling we have is that we are already late”.

The media, regarding this topic, “was not there”, as a matter of fact, it had never truly been there and a lot has to be done in order for it “to be there” in the future. The crisis that is being announced in the media system speaks of a greater precariousness in the sector and of a loss of independence in the editorial rooms, for which the task of scrutinizing that which is public is ever more complex and difficult. Education and Schools are topics that somehow “strange” to the media, in particular to television. These are noticeably the topics that are least present in the media agenda and the ones which are granted

the least time in the lineup of news programs, especially in the Public Television Service (*Radiotelevisão Portuguesa - RTP*).

It is not by chance that the “difficult” topics for those in the government _such as education, healthcare, justice, culture_ are the ones which have least visibility in the public television service news _ the RTP. It is not by chance indeed. The problem is that these are the fundamental sectors for citizenship, for a faster consolidation of the democratic experience which, naturally, can only be consolidated with a different stance by the media system and by means of the civic and fearless intervention of social communication.

The media, here, ought to make their choice. The public vehicles (RTP) clearly do make their choice, however badly, always too much institutional and dependent of the government system, as can be seen, reducing, for instance, the educational topic (which is absolutely key and vital for the progress of the country) to scarce 44 hours/year (1.9% of the total), thus falling in the shadow of the old ideological apparatus. Notice that education is the subject matter to which the least amount of time was given by the RTP1 in 2006 and, as a general rule, it happens, except in exceptional years like 2008 and 2009, when the strikes and struggles by teachers took place at the national level, against the exaggeratedly bureaucratic assessment system that the government intended to impose, without any public or school debate.

The public system then published news reports on this topic, soon condemned by the political-administrative system. One can recall the “Give me the mobile phone now” case. At the time, the Northern Regional Educational Management (*Direcção Regional de Educação do Norte – DREN*) disliked the fact that the Social Communication agencies showed the video about the dispute over a cellular phone in a classroom at Carolina Michaelis do Porto school. Another exceptional case was the fact that the Ministry of Education was against the report written by the RTP, by the way rare, in which the Ministry of Education accused public television of “withholding images and information”. The cause was a report about violence in schools, broadcasted in the RTP1 news program on May 30, 2006. The report had been elaborated with the consent of the executive board and faculty, and the images of teachers and students had been blurred in order for them not to be recognized, yet the report resulted in information that was of little warranty to the poor education and disciplinary conditions in a common classroom, which could be situated in any school in the country. One can recall here, by the way, the thought by Marcel Frydman, referred to by Perava (1994, p. 187):

If one can experimentally demonstrate that violence provoked [...] by television can be attenuated by verbalization or by education through cinematographic language (or audio-visual, we add) such a prevention in schools must then be organized.

The same is to say _based on the trials by Frydman _ that such a prevention in the media must be organized. One can recall the case mentioned of the assault and burglary of the CTT station in Nova Oeiras, on March 25, 2009, which made the “tabloid” headlines of three general news programs, and which was kept alive in a continuum, general data as *fait-divers*, without any sociological contextualization nor specialized interpretation; it came basically to be constituted as an alibi of the second-hand character of something absolutely determining in the political agenda, which was the parliament debate about the possible mortgage of the country and of the new generations in face of the controversial expenditure policy of the government public investment in a context of a heavy national debt.

Basically, this is all about the recurrence of an enunciative regularity, transversal to television information in general, which is configured in a continuous cycle of rational discourse series framed by the great categories of tragic current events, of institutional policies, of sports (football) and of the social and criminal *fait divers*, a strategy which can be ultimately defined as an endless “unsaid”, early on about the plurality and diversity of citizens’ voices, of their experience, of their identity, of their social and cultural heritage, of their “life world”, of that which is truly taking place, as was the mentioned case of the degradation of the educational institution in Portugal throughout decades,

something which has been clearly abandoned by the media agenda.

Memory and forgetfulness are, thus, a duality which, in terms of the media agenda, is rarely visualized in the memory axis. Seldom do we identify a more assertive approach, one which meets the demands of the citizens’ civil virtues and of their experience. Nowadays, it is evident that, for example, based on the analysis of scientific literature about television journalism in Portugal, there are regularities, rational series in the social construction of reality as seen by the media, above all by television, be it in the plane of the lack of voice diversity, or in the plane of pluralism, which, in the restricted space of political-partisan journalism, in the context of the parliamentary scene, does not even get to be truly “plural”.

Beyond this point, the editorial practices are not innocuous, as we have seen. If, on the one hand, they reflect an enunciative institutional model, on the other hand they limit themselves, they self-regulate themselves in a space of forgetfulness and of the “unsaid”, internalized by the very television device, which is denounced to us by this deficit of citizenship experience and by the laterality of knowledge about social processes. In summary, institutionalization, spectacle and tragic current events dominate the hierarchy of the agenda and, as a consequence, they format the celebration of the consensus and of the conflict as realities enclosed in themselves, as authentic *fait divers*, given the

fact that they appear to us as events that lack content, that bear in themselves a total piece of information, that contain all of their knowledge being equally perceived by all, ensuring a device that is closer to the “truth” and one which calms all restlessness.

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Jornalismo televisivo e crime violento, ou sobre um decisivo “não-dito”

Resumo:

Este texto pretende fazer uma reflexão sobre algo que é relativamente novo na comunicação social portuguesa, que é a sobreatenção, de características e efeitos sensacionalistas, que em particular o meio televisivo está a conceder – com honras de abertura de telejornal – aos delitos criminosos de grande impacto público, isto num momento em que Portugal está mergulhado em uma crise de valores e económica tida como uma das mais profundas da era democrática. Dessa forma, procuramos contextualizar a questão, em termos teóricos, e também no contexto nacional, e discorrer sobre práticas e metodologias de enquadramento jornalístico que contribuam para superar esse tratamento de tipo tabloide, na perspectiva de que os media tenham neste âmbito sobretudo uma ação preventiva simultânea com a sua estratégia informativa.

Palavras chaves:

Jornalismo. Televisão. Violência.
Prevenção. Escrutínio.

Periodismo televisivo y crimen violento, o sobre un decisivo “no dicho”

Resumen:

Este trabajo pretende reflexionar sobre algo que es relativamente nuevo en los medios de comunicación portugueses, que es la grande atención, de características y efectos sensacionales, que la televisión en particular está dando – con los honores de apertura de las noticias – a los actos criminales de gran impacto público, esto en un momento en que Portugal está inmerso en una crisis económica y de valores, considerada una de las más profundas en la era democrática. De este modo tratamos de contextualizar el problema, en términos teóricos, y también en el contexto nacional, y discutir las metodologías y prácticas periodísticas que contribuyan a la superación de este tipo de tratamiento sensacionalista, en la perspectiva de que los medios de comunicación tienen principalmente una acción preventiva simultánea a su estrategia de información.

Palabras chaves:

Periodismo. Televisión. Violencia.
Prevención. Escrutinio.

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