Indifference as a Curable Evil. Towards a Common Path for the Protection of Children in the Face of Media-Terrorism

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Abstract

The article focuses on an issue that has remained in the shadows of the public debate on the war between Russia and Ukraine, i.e., the relationship between media narratives and the children and adolescents directly or indirectly involved in the conflict. Whether through direct on-the-ground experience or media exposure to unprecedented horror, children are the silent victims. The thesis is that with regard to minors, media practitioners at all levels should become aware of child protection regulations and their communication responsibilities, which necessarily implies the assimilation of the ethical dimensions a daily practice. In this way, the media could fully exercise their mission as Social Action Societies, guided not only by profit but fully embedded within a true "moral economy".

Keywords: media narratives about war, children protection, media ethics, information overload, media Literacy

Introduction. Children and young people between real war and media terrorism

"*Today, when the whole world is commemorating International Children's Day, we must state with sadness that almost 700 Ukrainian children, according to official statistics alone, became victims of this war. They were either killed or wounded. But I don't think anyone knows how many children are victims of Russian aggression today*," is the statement of the Archbishop of Kyiv Sviatoslav Shevchuk in his video message of 1 June 2022 (Ukrainian Catholic Crisis Media Center, 2022).

His denunciation calls into question an issue that is still marginal in the public debate on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, or at least little explored by scholars, public opinion, and journalism: the protection of the most vulnerable groups, such as children and adolescents, whether involved directly or indirectly in the conflict.

On the one hand, minors are victims of war and instruments of war propaganda. On the other, they are overexposed to the conflict narrative and find themselves emotionally involved in an unprecedented horror show in which media narration protocols and child protection are too often forgotten.

Regarding the analysis of the complex situation of the war between Russia and Ukraine, both media narration and child protection fall squarely within the field of attention of this journal, which urges a more decisive commitment to a new communication policy aimed at the protection those segments of the population exposed to media narratives of all kinds that are more fragile for reasons of age, education, and social affiliations.

In the second half of the 20th century, Albert Bandura coined the expression "moral disengagement", which refers to a characteristic of numerous actors in the contemporary public space, i.e., actors who tend to engage in behavior with negative consequences for personal advantage (often economic gain or individual "security") without such behavior affecting their sense of self-esteem and self-respect (Bandura, 1999).

Bandura also identifies several dimensions through which the moral threshold tends to be lowered, permitting a more rapid acceptance of acts of violence: moral justification, euphemistic labelling (a mechanism based on the power of language that allows a reprehensible action to be masked by the attribution of positive characteristics so that the subject feels free of responsibility), advantageous comparison (comparing one's own deplorable act with a worse one, to alter perception and judgement), shifting of blame, diffusion of responsibility

(e.g. "everyone does it"), distortion of consequences or non-consideration of consequences, dehumanization of the victim, attribution of guilt: these are the mechanisms of moral disengagement that can be observed in individual, collective, and even institutional conduct on a daily basis.

Such public behavior also be applied to a form of moral disengagement that public and private actors, politics and media institutions *in primis*, have displayed towards the issue of minors who are victims of the war in Ukraine and, although apparently less relevant, towards minors who find themselves projected into the often-unfiltered representations of war through the media, especially television and the web.

For children who are victims of actual war, those who lose their lives, and their families, experience the trauma of being a refugee at an early age, the actions available to us are, for the most part, those calling for solidarity, aid, shelter, and psychological support (Fazel & Stein, 2002).

More can be done in the second situation, i.e., when children and young people are overexposed to catastrophic media texts, strong and violent images, and the indiscriminate representation of children in difficult situations. Often, the media and their representatives rely on mechanisms (it is always someone else who must watch out for the overexposure of children and young people on TV) or advantageous comparisons ("others do worse"), thereby tending to justify commercial strategies that are incompatible with the needs of children and young people. Consequently, it becomes important to take appropriate measures to counter such deep-seated evil that can instill itself in the most fragile minds and even spill over into our political and social bodies.

Certain production routines are often imposed to the detriment of the sensitivities and rights of the most fragile, primarily minors, neglecting the impact that these experiences can have on the outcomes of socialization processes and the development of the personality of children, tomorrow's adults.

Indeed, still reeling from the traumatic impact of Covid 19, young people, particularly children, have suddenly found themselves catapulted into a new and even more violent reality far beyond any rational comprehension: war. War is certainly not a normal situation for those involved: neither for those who experience it directly nor for those who follow it through screens of all kinds, let alone those who narrate it.

Overcoming fear. Assessing child protection in digital media

Nothing more than poorly managed fear can have devastating effects on human beings' biological and social nature. Fear destroys the fragile platform of mutual trust, challenges the role of institutions, and allows the affliction of insecurity to insinuate itself into people's hearts and limit their desire to project into the future. This problem was even more relevant during the Covid-19 pandemic, which began with the first lockdown in 2020 and has now been extended and amplified with the new threat of the neighboring war in Ukraine, which is increasingly affecting the most vulnerable groups of children and young people.

Fully aware of the difficulties that media operators are facing in guaranteeing the fundamental right to information in a challenging and even precarious operating context, it seems appropriate to introduce a reflection involving all the components of civil society and, in particular, the media in all its forms, regardless of the broadcasting platforms, to balance information with humanity, avoiding broadcasting excessively spectacularized and bloody narratives and respecting children's rights when they might be present in front of the screens.

To combat such phenomena, we have regulatory tools at our disposal, such as deontological charters for journalists and self-regulation or co-regulation codes for media operators[5], which the European regulations on Audiovisual Media Services of recent communication seasons also refer to (European Parliament, 2018). In Italy, these regulatory instruments are upstream of the TV and Minors Code, a document on the basis of which the Media and Minors Committee operates at the Ministry of Economic Development (MiSE). The need to guarantee a media environment unpolluted by an increasingly compulsive, polarised, and conflictual communication has also been taken up by all the Italian and international regulations on the subject, starting from the Constitutional Charter and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to arrive at the recent *Testo Unico per la fornitura di servizi di media audiovisivi*

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[5] In Italy, the reference is the Carta di Treviso, approved in 1990 by the Ordine dei giornalisti and Fnsi – in agreement with Telefono Azzurro and Authorities and Institutions of the City of Treviso - sets the deontological rules concerning minors. This document, already revised in 2006, in the light of the changes that occurred in the media world, was amended and updated by the Ordine dei giornalisti e Fnsi in the current version approved on 6 July 2021. The Charter draws its inspiration from the principles and values of the Constitution, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Adolescent, implemented in Italy by Law no. 176/1991, international and European regulations and the law establishing the Order of Journalists (no. 69/1963) by extension of Article 2. In addition to these documents is the self-regulation code "Tv e Minori" (2002), which is the basis for the functioning of the Comitato Media e Minori.

(Legislative Decree no. 208 of 8 November, 2021) which represents the transposition of EU Directive 2018/1808) and in force since December 2021.

In view of the entry into force of the new Consolidated Text, the Media and Minors Committee saw the urgency of proceeding with the updating of the *TV and Minors Self-Regulation Code* in light of the technological, social and communication changes and the strong urgency of the emergencies of recent years. This process reaffirms the importance of the synergy between the Media System and all the other institutions involved in guaranteeing the harmonious growth and development of minors as well as awareness of media education and the configuration of a cultural awareness-raising and training project on the relevant issues in this field and on the main changes taking place. This Code is an important cultural tool to counteract war and the fears in children's eyes. For example, the *Garante per la Protezione dei dati personali/ Guarantor for the Protection of Personal Data* and the *Autorità per le Garanzie nelle Comunicazioni/ Italian Communications Regulatory Authority* intervened, calling on the media to provide more responsible and respectful information to children and young people.

"No more desperate children's faces on television, in newspapers, and on social networks. Let's at least avoid taking the youngest ones to war a second time, in the digital dimension" (Garante per la protezione dei dati personali, 2022). According to the opinion of this protective body, any personal data concerning children, including images, should only enter the media system if it is indispensable or when its publication is in the child's best interest. There is a concrete risk that the images and data, in the digital dimension of the algorithms, will haunt those children forever insofar as they may be exposed to discriminatory consequences of a social, cultural, religious, and political nature, as well as even, in the present day, unforeseeable consequences.

From its perspective, the *Autorità per le Garanzie nella Comunicazione* (AGCOM) invites communication operators, in full respect of editorial autonomy and Article 21 of the Italian Constitution (which guarantees freedom of information), to pay attention to the use of war images, "in order to avoid turning them into an unnecessary spectacle" (AGCOM, 7 March 2022).

In this sense, all broadcasters must carry out the activity of television information, a service of general interest also referred to in Article 4 of the European directive on audiovisual media (European Parliament, 2018). Broadcasters are required to guarantee adequate information on current events in order to con-

tribute to the formation of an informed public opinion, conforming to criteria of impartiality, fairness, completeness, correctness and plurality of points of view.

To make the reflection more complete, it was decided to use the results of the national research project (Progetto di rilevante interesse nazionale – PRIN) "Media e Terrorismi. L'impatto della Comunicazione e delle reti digitali sull'insicurezza percepita"[6]. The project relied on analyzing the content of media narratives dealing with terrorist attacks in recent years (2015-2020), focus groups with pre-adolescents and adolescents, and in-depth interviews with media operators and police force representatives. Ideas and proposals were developed that went far beyond the issues posed by international terrorism, aiming to interpret and counter distortions in media narratives and to orient security, media, and public space operators in other complex contexts, such as migration, crime and more recently, pandemics and war, which have upset geopolitical balances, precarious security and information production routines (Gavrila & Morcellini, 2022).

This part of the research, devoted to children and adolescents exposed to violent television texts carrying traumatic messages, leads to some conclusions that we can also make about what happened during the period of the war in Ukraine. The first and most vigorous response from the minors interviewed highlighted that it was not terrorism but television and its catastrophic messages that generated the most fear. However, these narrative modes are not new and are, to a certain extent, part of what scholars have called 'the Italian anomaly' (De Domenico, Gavrila & Preta, 2003; Morcellini, 2005), characterized among others by an excess of particularization of pain, and even the invention "the TV of pain" genre, which turns individual and collective trauma into a strategy of audience engagement (Morcellini, 2013).

Therefore, one can also take against the "black" narrative as valid in relation to the unfiltered and ongoing war narrative[7]. In the light of the symbolic violence unleashed by the strategies of terror intrinsic to war, the collective trauma that ensues (Alexander, 2012), the capacity of global traumatic events to amplify

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[6] The research project "Media e Terrorismi. L'impatto della Comunicazione e delle reti digitali sull'insicurezza percepita", started in 2015 and was directed by Mihaela Gavrila together with Mario Morcellini, with the involvement of academic scholars from six Italian universities.

[7] For several weeks, starting on 27 February 2022, with the beginning of the War in Ukraine, the Italian mainstream television networks devoted more than 50 per cent of their news broadcasting time (news, talk shows, infotainment programs) to the topic. This choice has been strongly criticized by public opinion, also in the light of the excessive particularization of the topic and the treatment of the topic not only as a duty to inform.

the sentiment of fear through the use of the media and the almost "pedagogical" action of transforming the attitudes and behavior of the public subjected to the media bombardment (Gerbner & Signorielli, 1988; Boltanski, 1999), it is necessary to imagine a *communicative counter-performance* to oppose the "war performance": a counter-narrative that balances information with humanity and that places sensitivity towards all those involved at the center.

Ultimately, insecurity is an evil that can be defeated as long as social and cultural capital that enables people to interpret and manage emotions, fears, and everything that fuels hostile feelings and visions of a threatening future is restored (Benasayag & Schmit, 2003). The way to reconcile the shock generated by media terrorism and war with the maintenance of social equilibrium is based on symbolic resources and communication that favors a narrative capable of becoming an explanation or at least a contextualization of social facts; a pro-social communication that can become a form of accompaniment to change, reducing stress and complexity.

Alliances against moral disengagement

Hyper-communication is no guarantee of the quality of communication (Wolton, 2016: 13-22); on the contrary, it cultivates a greater sense of inadequacy and affects our connection with others: sicker, lonelier, more fearful, more secure in our insecurities and, therefore, more unhappy, as the categories underlying the various world reports on happiness also show (Helliwell, Layard, Sachs & De Neve, 2021).

In this context, focus on the universe of audiovisual media must be even more accentuated since these are contents, often multiplatform, that are primarily part of the communicative diet of weaker subjects such as minors. The shared commitment should go in the direction of a decisive strategy to consider audiovisual media as a safe space of "cohabitation" between values, generations, and sensitivities, favorable to the development of children and young people but also the rebirth of society as a whole (Colombo, 2000; Gavrila, 2021). Going in this direction is the aforementioned European legislation of 2018, which broadens the spectrum from linear audiovisual media to web offerings. It has now been adopted at the level of the member states and provides, in addition to the protection of vulnerable groups, the protection of national and international security and the fight against all forms of terrorism, violence, and hatred (Gavrila, 2021).

Hyper-communication is no guarantee for quality communication (Wolton, 2016: 13-22); on the contrary, it cultivates a greater sense of inadequacy and places us in a state of deficit of real connection with others: sicker, lonelier, more fearful, more secure in our insecurities and, therefore, more unhappy, as the categories underlying the various world reports on happiness also show (Helliwell, Layard, Sachs & De Neve, 2021). Becoming aware of the responsibilities of communication implies the assimilation of the ethical dimension as a daily practice by media practitioners at all levels.

In this way, the media could fully exercise their mission as social joint-stock companies, guided not only by the logic of profit but fully embedded within an authentic 'moral economy' (Sayer 1999: 68; Murdock 2011; Hesmondhalgh 2015).

In times of information overload, misinformation and disorientation generated by the stratification of uncertainties and fears, the proposals offered above go in the direction of a renewed willingness to bet on the prospects of an economy of knowledge and good communication to block the bulimia of insecurity, which pours into homes every day, through screens of all kinds, cultivating media-terrorism, flowers of evil, harmful behavior and with repercussions on the physical and mental health of children, adolescents and society as a whole. These choices put the most fragile people at the center, whether culturally or by age.

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