

Violence in Mass Media: Stereotypes, Symbols, Reality

Reet Hiimäe

With the evolution of media the traditional folklore declined and folklore influenced by the media started to prevail. Although it spreads faster and on a wider scale, local peculiarities might still be detected, say, in the case of the readers of a particular newspaper or news about the events in some local town. One difference between the old folk heritage and the media is that generally a popular narrative was not supposed to bring financial profit, although the number of listeners might have been important for a narrator. There was no need to shock the listener constantly, such elements were used only to achieve figurative expressiveness. The media, on the other hand, is a product, and reality 'for sale' must be presented in an acceptable form (cf. Scharlau 1986:189). Or as J.Hornby (1983: 100) argues: "The aim of media is not to inform us as well as possible, but to attract audience as much as possible." That is why shock effects, or conscious and unconscious abstractions of the kind emerge. The media determines the topics and emphases, secretly shaping the structure of the human mind and in a wider sense popular culture as well. While the rule that good news is bad news applies to media (Finkelstein 1969: 57) and violence is constantly emphasised, it is only natural that such a tendency is spreading on the personal level as well. The community as a whole is beginning to select and emphasise reports of violence from amongst other information. This has brought us unconsciously and unwillingly to the dissemination of chaos where an almost religious background could be detected – first, in connection with the apocalyptic expectations of the end of the millennium, but after the mystically sounding year 2000 arrived and the ones who were expecting an end of the world were left disappointed, people were eager to find a new landmark of their apocalyptic fantasies. Now newspa-

per stories and whole horror books (e.g. “Apocalypse 2012”) are written about the date 21.12.2012. Scientists find the whole idea ridiculous, but the media sees no reason to stop, because the year 2012 phenomenon is just a too good journalistic marketing idea. Not surprisingly at all, a Hollywood catastrophe movie named “2012” is already shot, only adding to the 2012 panic.

The daily recurrence of reports of violence is occupying people’s minds, it seems that nothing can get better – it only gets worse until finally an end comes to everything. Or as Olev Remsu says commenting on the criminal report programs in Russia: “They employ the tone of disaster, every morning starts with gore and horror. They are trying to tell us that we have reached the stage where death follows us everywhere.” (“Postimees”, Oct. 24, 1997). There can be no legal censorship in the media over reporting or propagating violence, since that would conflict the Constitution’s provision about the freedom of speech.

Mass media is so flooded with negative news that no space is left for anything positive. For example, statistics of the news in the front page of “Postimees” reveal that negative news strongly outnumber positive news. Thus, reports on acts of violence are not in proportion with the ratio of other news (cf. Prokop 1986: 136). People trust the media and if some infamous act of violence is retold to others, people tend to add that the information is taken from a newspaper or television to prove their story. The consumer never really contemplates on the fact that news are being created using a real event as source material, that what they are seeing is sc. ‘media-reality’ (cf. Faulstich 1995: 87). However, we are faced with a question – how many of the reports of violence are actually stereotypical, artificial, and based on myths?

ACCOUNTS OF REMOTE COUNTRIES

Even when there was no mass media, the world suffered from earth-quakes, floods and violent murders just as it does today, but due to the lack of a mediator these did not become a part of people’s everyday life. Such information was not a part of popular culture (Postman 1996: 17). In fact, even the folk narratives about far-off lands suggest something unusual and strange to the audience – the narratives are about evil dog-muzzled war-

riors on the other side of high mountains and about cannibal people living somewhere at the world's end. These stories are based on incomplete information and the result is a non-realistic image of some region. Today, the informative function of a folk narrative is taken over by mass media, still, information circulates the way it used to and the status of the receivers is the same. There are no other witnesses of the events other than the correspondents and, therefore, no one can be certain what is right and what is not. The information received through the media is adapted into the background knowledge (also folkloric knowledge) of the receivers and the missing gaps in the information are added randomly.

Generally we receive information which emphasises only a certain angle of the event. For example, the reports on the war in Iraq left the impression that the only participant in the conflict was Saddam Hussein, the existence and the morale of the tens of thousands of soldiers who actually fought the war was hardly mentioned. Some countries are known only as places of assassinations and conflicts (say, the rebellion of the Hutu and Tutsi in Africa, or the Palestinian-Israeli conflict). Such tendencies creates a false illusion of the hostile and dangerous world around us. The place names where the disasters take place have often no meaning. We receive the facts of the events without any actual context. The media provides photographs of evidence but even these do not make the unknown places any more real for us. We only remember the information as a whole, often eluding reality (cf. Postman 1996: 97). So people warn those who intend to spend their holiday in Turkey: "Do not go there, there's a war going on." Or they say to people travelling to Thailand: "Thailand is a dangerous place, they kill people for anything, they will accuse you of trafficking drugs and put you in prison." And if you ask them how they know that, the answer is: "Oh well, everybody says that." On the other hand, when speaking to those who have actually visited these countries, the comments are totally different.

Many people form their perception of coloured people in the same way. As the personal contact is often non-existent, the attitude (either positive or negative) is generally based on forms of media (mainly films on racism) and it is thus, in fact, folkloric by nature.

LOCAL NEWS

The shock-provoking rash presentation of acts of violence is characteristic of the local news as well. Even the fact that a reporter interviewing a folklorist about the customs of the All Souls' Day asks first whether the tradition also included something frightening, amply illustrates this particular tendency on the part of the journalists in their attempts to make news.

Quite recently the newspapers featured a sensational account of a woman suffering from burns who told her listeners that aliens were trying to clone her. The newspaper account is based solely on the victim's own words and there is nothing to prove its accuracy, but for a reader the information is truthful and is therefore passed on to other people. It is merely another piece of evidence for the existence of hostile "humanoids" that has brought a hidden fear anew to life. Nobody realises that the interpretation might actually be based on sc. urban legends about UFOs which the victim might have heard from someone else. A hundred years ago similar burn-marks might have been taken as evidence of an earthly disease caused by gnomes – an explanation in keeping with the contemporary understanding.

Local news is characterised by its emphasis on details. For example, the criminal reports in the daily paper "Postimees" aimed mainly at the readers in Tartu are sometimes extremely specific in their accounts: "The woman was killed by a blow with a square piece of wood on the head, according to our sources the murderer hit only once. Although the clothes of the woman were torn, experts could find no evidence of violent rape on the woman's body. Her money was stolen." ("Postimees", Nov.7, 1997). The reports also describe murder scenes with extreme precision, mentioning the building and the street where the murder took place or the body was found. Such precision makes the criminal case more real. There are more and more places which provide a setting for horror stories, and these stories are taken seriously. Then if one person assures ten others that a murder was committed in his back yard and these ten people, in their turn, will tell the story to ten others, it seems as if a hundred murders have been committed. Therefore, we can by no means talk about giving objective accounts of reality.

STEREOTYPES

Murders and bomb threats are classified as daily news but there is hardly anything new about them. These themes are recurrent and that is the reason why such stereotypes come into being. Media researcher N. Postman compares the flow of this sort of information with the sea: there is water everywhere, yet nothing to drink (Postman 1996: 87). Being aware of reports of violence neither relieves fears associated with it nor reduces crime. The mere fact that one has read about thirty stabbing attacks does not make him behave correctly in any given situation. On the contrary, the flood of information causes an overload to one's analytic capabilities. There is not enough time to work through all the material and analyse everything objectively. People often merely retell the received news to others, thinking that if it has been broadcast, the news has to have something to do with us. In face-to-face interaction, the comment: "Did you read it – it was written on the criminal reports page?" has acquired an important role. And the person who is told the story passes the information heard on to others. As the number of reports on acts of violence is constantly increasing, the reporters have time neither to formulate them in a less stereotypical manner nor check their accuracy. A sensational piece of news has to be published immediately before competing newspapers get their hands on it. With respect to the information itself the reporters are constantly using an abundance of totally irrelevant expressions, such as: "killed in an extremely brutal manner, the victim suffered for hours." An article about a bomb explosion in Jerusalem on the front page of "Postimees" (July 31, 1997) states: "The market place was covered with pools of blood and scattered fruit, the explosion had torn off a leg of one of the injured. The two dead bodies which were most ruptured belonged to suicide terrorists." Certainly, such descriptions cannot be classified under the laconic and formal style of news and are aimed at evoking fantasy. Really, a detailed description of a disaster scene thousands of kilometres away from us is totally irrelevant, still, this is the part of the news that we will actually remember.

Media tends to focus on victims, the number of survivors is often not worth mentioning (Heilmann 1990: 204). We get the

impression that there were casualties only, but in reality only one of the ten thousand people died.

Crime reports might be considered as certain narrative variants that are illustrated with corresponding photographs. The news of different newspapers or radio stations about the same event are just different versions of the same type of narrative. Although the news tries to be unexpected and shocking, same scenes that have already proved effective are repeated over and over. For example, a photo taken at the scene of a crime might be added to the text, although with the absence of the text it includes nothing that would refer to the crime. The photographs of murderers have a similar effect. When they know who it is on the photo people search for certain signs in their faces and state: I would have known the moment I met him that he was a murderer. And a stereotypical image of the criminal is formed. Walking along streets in the dark people compare everyone they meet with the image in their minds lest the passers-by might have such features. Such patterns of thought result in the belief that only murderers walk around late at nights. The mere fact that the passer-by is compared to a murderer, makes him in a way a criminal.

Even the structure of reports of violence is stereotypical: the headline reports the accident, it is followed by a speculation as to the motivation and a detailed description of the act, then by a statement whether the victim will survive or not, and the final solution – the suspect is either caught or not and the nature of a (possible) punishment. Certainly, crimes do follow a logical progression, but this is why it seems unnecessary to go through it in detail again and again in each new report. The result is the formation of a stereotypical understanding of murders.

Although media reports are similar to folk narratives, one of the differences is its employing of violence. The earlier folk tales might have contained sadistic elements but they still had a happy ending. The cruel and terrible fate fell upon the bad characters who had earned their punishment. The massmedia reports of violence include distinctively typical criminals and typical victims, but the course of events is different. Often the reports try to arouse sympathy towards the victim, the report is illustrated by the description of the victim's extraordinary character using epithets like 'the ladies' man', 'always smiling and sociable'

("Kuller", Nov 10, 1997). The criminal, on the other hand is a natural born bad-guy: "He symbolises corruptness. In talking about a wasted youth he will be the first one mentioned. Now that he has become a murderer, it is possible that people might start using his name to scare children." ("Kuller", Nov 10, 1997). Most common plots describe the death of the victim, the rest of the report is concerned with the procedure for the search for and apprehension of the criminal and the trial which ends with his sentencing. One of the recent examples is a heartbreaking incest drama in Austria: the case of Joseph Fritzl, who was accused of holding his daughter captive for 24 years and fathering her seven children. In this case the victim and her children were able to get away alive, but the media was again full of even the smallest details of the case for months, slowly nearing to the grand finale – the sentencing of 'the monster of Austria' by a lifelong imprisonment ("Postimees" 24.08.2008). The repertoire of urban legends follows a similar course of events. All this alludes to a change in the human mind. The prime objective of reports of violence today is the wish for revenge. The reader follows the actions of a dangerous criminal very anxiously indeed. Having heard about the catching of the criminal satisfies the reader since the brute gets what he deserves and that reduces the risk of any possible further aggressions on his part.

INFLUENCE

The influence of violence as reported in the media might not have immediate results. But it accumulates over a period of time. Acquired patterns of behaviour might remain latent but they are just waiting to become activated. We get the impression that if violence is so common in the media and happens so easily, we will finally cross the ethical line and violence becomes a norm in life. The objective evaluation of various situations may change and the same methods repeatedly experienced through the media will now be applied to situations that are not in fact dangerous. The repetition suggests that this is the normal behaviour (cf.: Faulstich 1995: 79).

In Germany, for instance, where the economy supporting a free press is more developed than in Estonia, the influence of mass media appears to be stronger. The negative world-view it

suggests is so common that even in several scientific German grammar-books three out of four model sentences talk about a disaster (earth-quake, assassination, fire). In any case I can find no reason why the rule for forming the plural should be illustrated with a model sentence like: The train accident ended with four casualties and six people injured. (Sommerfeldt, Starke). Or an example from Estonian in colloquial speech: "This year we are going to have so many apples that it will kill us."

A person might also start picturing himself in certain situations as the witness of some final solution (Doltinchem, Hartung 1986: 286). This enables us to follow an unpleasant situation not taking part in it directly (cf. Goodlad 1986: 106). Perhaps it is out of fear that we read violence reports, as if knowing a great deal about them might reveal the source of our fears. Specific cases seem to confirm the belief that such acts happen to someone else and not the reader. But the truth is that the new and new amounts of horror stories reinforce the self-induced myths. People experience the most horrible murder scenes in their minds, they repeat them over and over even for days depending how shocking is the nature of the report and the images that it causes in their mind. Thus, a human mind might create a lengthy "mind film" with multiple versions on the basis of a single criminal report only a few lines long. Often the mere headline of an act of violence might do. Sentences in bold print such as "Train Bisects a Man's Head", "The Fatal Night Ride" or "Fellow Tippler Stabbed in Kidneys" are symbols that have the power to evolve certain associations. The text adds no further information but it helps to confirm the image already created.

Sometimes our general awareness based on the news we receive is so abstract that it results in the awakening of latent fears in people, expressed by vague anxiety and insecurity. A good example here would be the words of a German lady: "Actually, I have no idea what Mafia is, but it still scares me. People tell me all kinds of horrible stories about it." Similar indistinct symbols of evil or hostility might be found in the interviews of statesmen. If a situation becomes confusing people like to say: "It must be in somebody's interest," or "It must be good for somebody". This 'somebody' in this context is like a mythological creature – it has no clear form but no one doubts that it exists. The process is infinite since people pass it on. The final result is that

people start anticipating the attack of this vague “somebody” as they secure their apartment doors with more and more locks and view the whole of humankind with suspicion.

IN CONCLUSION

I would like to argue that: A news report in order to be effective must be shocking, and reports concerning violence serve as the best examples here. As the number of new and shocking reports is not infinite, stereotypes are created. Stereotypical reports tend to make their way into oral folklore and they start circulating in media as well as among individuals. It is possible that the creation of such stress and anxiety is actually quite different from real life, and the only way to avoid getting depressed when reading newspapers is to bear just that in mind. At the same time people’s attitude towards the structure of mass media is very stable making the likelihood of reports of violence disappearing from news reports almost impossible. People might get the impression that there are no news worth reading left. It would be just as risky to substitute crime reports columns with loving and glorified omissions. Recalling the media reporting of the Soviet times we have to agree that such tactics functioned only to a certain extent. Nevertheless, it is quite plausible that public awareness might only benefit from reducing the stereotypical reports on acts of violence in the mass media.

References

Doltinchem, Dagmar von & Hartung, Klaus. 1986. Die Verhinderung der Phantasiearbeit in Superhelden-Comics. *Medienforschung. Analysen, Kritiken, Ästhetik*. 3. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 252–302.

Faulstich, Werner 1995. *Grundwissen Medien*. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag.

Finkelstein, Sidney 1969. *Sense and nonsense of McLuhan*. New York: International Publishers Co.

Goodlad, J. S. R. 1986. Zur Soziologie des populären Dramas. *Medienforschung. Analysen, Kritiken, Ästhetik*. 3. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 62–112.

Heilmann, Klaus 1990. *Die betrogene Gesellschaft. Kommunikation im Informationszeitalter*. Zürich & Wiesbaden: Orell Füssli Verlag.

Hornby, James 1983. Rumors of Maggie: Outlaw News in Folklore. Peter Narvaez & Martin Laba (Eds.). *Media Sense. The Folklore-Popular Culture Continuum*. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 99–120.

Postman, Neil 1996. *Wir amüsieren uns zu Tode. Urteilsbildung im Zeitalter der Unterhaltungsindustrie*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag.

Prokop, Dieter 1986. Kriterien der Kritik und der Analyse von Medienprodukten. *Medienforschung. Analysen, Kritiken, Ästhetik*. 3. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 136–180.

Scharlau, Birgit 1986. Kritik? Kritik! Die metropolitanen Medien und ihre Produkte. *Medienforschung. Analysen, Kritiken, Ästhetik*. 3. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 181–192.



Media & Folklore.
Contemporary Folklore IV

Edited by Mare Kõiva

Tartu 2009

How to cite this article:

Reet Hiemäe (2009). Violence in Mass Media: Stereotypes, Symbols, Reality. *Media & Folklore. Contemporary Folklore IV*. Edited by Mare Kõiva. Tartu: ELM Scholarly Press, pp. 195–204.

Article available online:

<http://http://www.folklore.ee/ri/pubte/ee/cf/cf4>