

❖ **Jean Seaton — *Carnage and the media: The making and breaking of news about violence***
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Reviewed by Martin Hirst

Jean Seaton is Professor of Media History and the University of Westminster, but her childhood was spent in the Smithfield meat markets of London. The story of her father's family-run butcher shop opens *Carnage* with a fascinating memoir of the blood and stench of a local abattoir that stands as a metaphor for modern journalism.

Seaton's historical journey begins with childhood memories of skinning rabbits, but covers a lot of ground: from the 'bread and circuses' of the Roman Empire, to iconic religious art in the middle ages, to the age of terror that we now inhabit.

The central theme of *Carnage* revolves around our seeming fascination with violence, bloodshed, atrocity, war and crime and the ways in which the news media both nourish and condemn the audience's taste for horror, disaster and the misfortune of others. There are well-established rituals in which both the news media and the audience participate, while constructing or watching violent events unfold within a news narrative. Over time, audiences are tutored in the appropriate responses — much like the way we used to cheer the cowboys with white hats and boo the black hats in the Saturday matinees.

Overall, this is an interesting, though sometimes difficult book. The opening chapter, "Blood in the High Street", is by far the most entertaining. It recounts Seaton's childhood as the daughter of a London butcher in post-war England and links the rituals of news consumption to our consumption of meat. We enjoy the blood which gives it flavour, but do not always want to mentally process the images of slaughter which are necessary to supply a palatable product to our tables. The second chapter, "Filth" is also highly entertaining and continues the news as flesh metaphor: "Both butchers and newsmen [sic] ... like their product raw and fresh ... News, like meat, is a fragile, transitory commodity ... Those who handle meat and news are ever conscious of the ticking clock — the need to take stock, replace the old with the new, clean the boards" (p.31).

Seaton is, in my view, at her best when discussing contemporary issues, such as the news media's difficult relationship with the military that has come to mark many conflicts in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries ("Wars and sentimental education"). In the age of 'terror' and long drawn-out unconventional wars against non-traditional enemies, the media's

role in either legitimating, or critiquing, the actions of governments and generals has taken on a new importance. So too has the news media's coverage of civilians caught up in conflict, which is an increasing feature of so-called 'low level' conflict in more urban and populated regions. Seaton examines the Balkans war involving Serbia, Croatia and NATO forces, but we have recently seen similar images and stories emerging from the conflict between Russia and Georgia over South Ossetia in the Caucasus. Disappointingly, as Seaton shows, much of the coverage continues to focus on individual impacts — the grieving mother, or wounded child — rather than on more collective and political news. "... innocent victims are not always available and — although effective in stirring feeling — when they are, they may over time confuse the public" (p.148).

However, I found the chapters linking news media to the Roman predilection for barbaric entertainments and to early Christian re-ification of the image of Christ, to be tendentious and stretched. These arguments rely on psychological explanations that idealise a human fascination with violence with which I am uncomfortable. I am suspicious of theoretical expositions premised on some universal fascination with pain and suffering that is innate to human nature. I think that one could argue, with equal conviction, that human nature is innately compassionate and sensitive to the pain of others. Ultimately we have the capacity for indifference to suffering and for heartfelt anguish in response to the same suffering. What changes is perhaps our material circumstances: our ability to contextualise the pain and to reflect on the circumstances of pain, guilt and remorse.

Today, I would argue, our responses are determined by the media we consume and by other social and cultural factors. Ultimately this depends on the extent to which we buy into the normalising frames presented by the news media, or how much we are able to re-read them in a critical fashion. Such a range of responses would be impossible if every human shared an innate predilection for violence or compassion.

So we have to confront the paradox of violence in the news. On one hand, news producers and news consumers seem to have a grisly fascination for death and destruction — "If it bleeds it leads". On the other, perhaps portrayals of realistic violence in the news can help to elicit public sympathy for victims and those less fortunate than us. There is another paradox at work, one embedded in the commodity form of news today. The news agenda is as much dictated by the needs of advertising and marketing as it is by public interest and the public's right to know.

"News is about pain" (p.102) — it is also about the mediation of suffering. News thrives on the pain of the 'other', delivering it in tidy little packages. It is the packaging that protects us, but it can also mislead us. In Seaton's account, news products need to follow a particular formula — one that includes a romanticisation of violence, the identification of victims and guilty perpetrators and the suggestion of a comforting outcome. Thus, Seaton argues, news is both an art form — like the medieval depictions of Jesus suffering on the cross — and a powerful influence over humans' perceptions of the world around them. As an institution — again like the Church — the news media also has its own determining interests and the motif of violence excites religious devotion in one instance and social conformity in the other.

Here I find myself agreeing with Seaton's explanations of the depiction of Christ's suffering as a powerful mechanism of social control in the medieval church — "Suffering also became part of a sophisticated visual propaganda" (p.110). In the news media, a depiction of the suffering of victims is also used as a means of cohering public allegiance — not to a church, but to the social formation of class afflicted capitalism. "'Their' suffering is worse than 'yours'; be thankful that you are safe and comfortable in your free-market world," appears as a common organising

theme in news bulletins. Of course, we are "remote from anguish" (p.122) most of the time, for example when it occurs in Iraq or Afghanistan. Our understanding of the suffering or ordinary Iraqis and Afghans is filtered through politico-cultural lenses that define and limit our potential sympathies. We cannot fully experience the mediated pain of others and our attachment to news about violence is vicarious; its power lies in its ability to direct our attention and our actions in acceptable directions. Seaton's observation that news values help to define a hierarchy of pain and suffering is a useful and relevant insight in this regard; news values function "as ways of attempting to communicate to audiences the nature of a distant suffering in the terms of an agreed scale" (p.126).

However, we also witness times when the socially controlling and organising function of the media can break down in the face of more momentous, real and 'truthful' events — reality can, on occasion, overwhelm normalising news values. As Seaton recounts, such an event was the collapse of the Soviet and Eastern European command economies in the late 1980s. The sight of thousands of refugees streaming across an unguarded border from East to West Germany sparked a real emotional response on the streets that could not be easily contained by a wounded state that had previously ruled through its own mechanisms of fear. "The sudden shared vision of possibility altered peoples' lives; brought down a regime and changed the world. It was composed out of a classic media process: a loop showing the audience its own behaviour" (p.140). That such world-changing events are rare is a testament to the power of the media to patrol the boundaries of acceptable responses to world events. In the case of East Germany there was a satisfying and convenient reason for encouraging East Germans to tear down the Berlin Wall — it was a powerful symbol of the power of the market.

The duality of the news media's fascination with violence is expressed through the contradictory messages it sends about violence, pain, guilt and compassion. Often, Seaton argues, the news media will attempt to elicit an emotional response from audiences in relation to images of carnage. One response is anger — directed at the alleged perpetrators. The other is sympathy for victims, or even pity. However, the pity aroused by the press is not always constructive, it is an 'ersatz' emotion that has no real purpose other than to fuel the audience's appetite for more shock-horror news.

This is a situation, she suggests, in which 'realism' and 'truth' become detached. We see in our daily news diet, mediated images of violence, often bloody and in horrifying detail, but there are times when this realistic portrayal of events is less than sufficient to provide us with a truthful account of what happened, or why it happened.

There is no real blame to be attached here. As Seaton argues, most journalists are not unethical ambulance chasers. However, journalists and news media generally, operate under conditions of ideological hegemony. The ability or willingness of individual reporters and editors to break from the media pack is weak under normal operating conditions. "In practice much of the media inevitably takes sides, seeking to back the 'virtuous' good against the 'culpable' bad. It goes without saying that reality is seldom so simple" (p.142). In the context of an ideological framework that journalists share (usually on a national basis), the forensic skills of investigation can be turned towards large crimes — such as genocide in Rwanda — or towards the more mundane events, such as the sexual deviance of a minor political figure.

There is no real equivalence here, but in the general mill of the news media they are given an affective moral equivalence — both are portrayed as somehow wrong and an affront to the sensibilities of the audience. This can only work when the audience is numbed into the normality of the social 'norm' — that is, when it is accustomed to presentations of violence that

are often sanitised, decontextualised and presented in sound-bite packages.

Then there is what Seaton describes as “attack journalism”. “The Roman games could scarcely match a British tabloid closing on a powerless victim...and the crowd shamelessly gorges on victims as culprits, who, the press makes clear, deserve no mercy” (p.292).

I am tempted to describe this as a political economy of mediated violence and it is an undercurrent in Seaton’s book, though it competes for attention with a more psychological approach to explanations. It is when such sentiments are expressed that I find myself beginning to disagree with the author. I have never been willing to accept a generalised account of audience psychology as an answer to the questions Seaton poses in this book.

I cannot accept as justification, the idea that the news media perpetuates a violence-ridden take on the world because it is merely appealing to some darker recesses of the human psyche. I rather favour a more material explanation, which Seaton also provides. It is her oscillation between the two that, for me, provides the central dynamic and dialectic in this book.

Seaton acknowledges that it is material conditions — the commodification of journalism from the late nineteenth century onwards — that create the news industry we have today (and indeed the conditions of its slow but steady decline in public favour). The media’s power to build-up public figures or ideas and to also destroy them is “wielded relentlessly under the cloak of democratic necessity but often motivated by political and commercial interests that are rarely disclosed” (p.292).

Indeed, the cultural and social norms governing the graphic display of violence — particularly violence to bodies — are varied geographically. As news from the ‘war on terror’ demonstrates on an almost daily basis, regional and cultural sensitivities to the depiction of severed body parts and dismembered corpses mark out some very real differences in approaches to what might once have been considered almost universal news values. It also marks out varying political and ideological motivations: in the USA, for example, a refusal to show horrific images of dead and wounded American soldiers from Iraq has more to do with the positioning of an enemy as ‘inhuman’ than it does with any cultural squeamishness about bloodshed and violence.

In my view, it is this political and ideological construction of news that creates and perpetuates a fascination with violence. Violent events — from random murders to the ‘war on terror’ — create a powerful morality tale that can be manipulated (consciously or unconsciously) for the benefit of the status quo — both commercial and political.

Thus news fulfils its function — the normalisation of existing social relationships and power structures — and allows both an outlet for anger and a repository for our worries, guilt and human empathy, so that they do not threaten to spill over into a generalised reaction against the system. In other words, the news media’s fascination with violence is a safety-valve designed to contain any eruptions of true emotion, particularly if such an outburst might lead to violence against the system in the form of social revolution. As Seaton concludes towards the end of *Carnage*: “This may help explain why audiences are sometimes bewilderingly indifferent to things that matter, and perplexingly obsessed with trivia” (p.294).

This book presents some interesting arguments that place the news media’s fascination with carnage, death, destruction and suffering into a rich historical context. While I find myself disagreeing with some aspects of Seaton’s analysis it is an important contribution to the scholarship of journalism. We all know that ‘bad’ news dominates; Seaton illuminates some

useful answers as to why this is the case.

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