Chapter 11

Mediating Death: The Role of Mass Media in Thana-Capitalism

Maximiliano Emanuel Korstanje
University of Palermo, Argentina

ABSTRACT

Originally, digital technologies were contemplated by public opinion as instruments which serve to make from this life a safer place. While over recent decades, the digital revolution was oriented to discuss to what extent humans being are credible and agents who can reach objectivity, no less true was that some mass-media paved the pathways for the rise of a new atmosphere of terror, which triggered after 9/11. Doubtless, terrorism, ISIS and 9/11 were the main allegories for the society of consumers. This opens the doors for a paradoxical situation, simply because viewers are enmeshed in a strange fascination for news disseminating crimes, terrorist attacks, calamities and disasters. In earlier research, we have dubbed to this new stage of capitalism, as Thana-Capitalism. In this respect, once conceived as a sign of weakness, consuming others’ death implies an aura of superiority for those who have been not touched by death. In the rise of Thana Capitalism, fear and death seem to be two touchstones that mediate between citizens and their institutions.

INTRODUCTION

In 2016 the author was attending some conferences and seminars at University of La Habana Cuba, when struck by news of the terrible hurricane Matthew, which baptized the area toward Cuba. Though this hurricane never altered its original trajectory, it wreaked havoc in Haiti and Florida as well as many cities of Caribbean islands. The fact was that this event represented a serious natural disaster which resonated as the main agenda of Cuban popular opinion over more than one week. Once returned to home, Buenos Aires (on 4 October 2016), the author was surprised to learn that journalism and media were not only unfamiliar with Matthew, but also that his stories and experiences for relatives and friends

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turned incredible and uncanny. In a couple of days after return, rather, once this hurricane hit Miami and left more than 800 fatal victims in Haiti, media not only gave its attention to Matthew, but broadcasted the hurricane as a killer that destroys everything while going. In view of this cognitive discrepancy, three main questions immediately surfaced. Personally the author had been affected by a looming threat (Matthew), though it was not medically apparent. Upon return to his secure home, a mediated image of disasters was imposed on himself and all his compatriots. Doubtless, there was a gap between reality and media reality that this chapter will seek to unpuzzle.

On closer inspection, such a dissociation is marked by what Baudrillard called “the spectacle of disaster”, where the self is dissociated from the here and now to be placed in a hypothetical future. Secondly, while the “exemplary center” remains untouched (in this case Miami, Florida), media pays marginal heed to news, but this changes at the time disasters appear to affect “the exemplary center” of Western civilization. Most importantly, Matthew only captivated the attention of Western audiences when it obliterated part of Haiti. This suggests that the “death of others” plays a leading role in configuring the symbolic borders of what should be preferred or avoided by an audience.

The present chapter is based on the author’s own interrogations on the roots of what he has dubbed as “Thana-Capitalism”. This is a strange fascination for people to witness the suffering of others. The author holds the thesis that this exists in an economy of impotence which produces a paradoxical situation. While audiences are disgusted for being subject to news of death, cruelty and pain caused by disasters, terrorism or wars, no less true is that lay people are certainly captivated by such news.

In this vein, Thana Capitalism exhibits a new stage of production which replaces the capitalism of risk described by modern sociologists as Beck (1992, 2006, and 2009) or Giddens (2013). After the 9/11 disaster, death became the main commodity to be exchanged and circulated in all circuits of media production. Not surprisingly, in such disasters, people feel pleasure in witnessing others’ death because, by the articulation of a ritual process, they reconfirm their special status of survivor. In view of this, French philosopher Jean Baudrillard has provided a discussion on the rise of a pseudo-reality, where events were transformed in “pseudo-events” (Baudrillard 2006). Marc Augè referred to 9/11 as founding events that subordinated the public audience to an ideological sense of reality where the borders between past and present are blurred (Augè, 2002).

This article is organized in several sections. In the first section, we explore the conceptual background where risk society operated. Following Beck and Giddens’ contribution, in this section, risk is strongly associated not only with the capacity of society to produce information, but considers a wider process of reflexivity that blurs the borders of already-existent institutions. Secondly, we explain the reasons why 9/11 is considered the “founding event” of a new stage of capitalism dubbed as “Thana Capitalism”. If risk played a leading role as commodity, this place was occupied by death. In Thana Capitalism there is a strange fascination with and repulsion for others’ death, which engages citizens with their institutions. As Luke Howie (2010) puts it, one of the paradoxes of terrorism seems to be the “uncanny” co-dependency of audience and cruelty expressed in bombing news. This symbolical dependency makes the problem a very hard concept to grasp. In order to understand Thana Capitalism, we are pressed to discuss the role of social Darwinism as an ideological discourse that legitimates the material asymmetries produced and reproduced by the elite. Thana-Capitalism expresses a pathological adaptation to death, proper of contemporary societies. In the last section, we discuss critically the recently published book The better of our angel nature to obtain a fresh diagnosis regarding the passage from reality to hyper-reality.
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