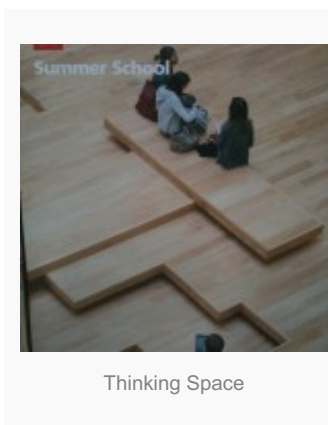


Show Me The Gore (guest blog)

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2010/07/19/show-me-the-gore-guest-blog/

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The following is by POLIS summer school student Emil Stigsgaard Fuglsang.

In his first-ever blog he gives his thoughts after a lecture on the media's portrayal of war and human suffering. It is a critique of the media professional's promise of impartiality and objectivity. Fuglsang does not believe anyone to be objective. Emil says he has written the following as an open letter to modern, commercial media professionals. He says he has tried to write the blog to entertain and provoke, not to inform.

Goddamn, bloody immorality – please! by Emil Stigsgaard Fuglsang

Dear media professionals: Who are You? Academic articles tell me You are perceived to be impartial and objective truth-tellers, and lecturers dub you gate-keepers and openers of information from the world that surrounds us, the normal people. From my cliché-cache, I hear You are supposed to be the fourth power of the state.

According to Israeli news reporter Amit Segal who spoke at our Summer School, You are all about “saying the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth – like in court.”

Whatever You may be, I think You are too much. I think, You think, that we (your herd of news consumers) think, we cannot think at all – at least not by ourselves. So You think for us, and make the divine judgement over what should – and – perhaps more troubling – what should not, contribute to our understanding of the world.

But I think! And I think, that most people think. Therefore, one over-critical think-too-much POLIS-summer school student could accuse You of forgetting who You are, and who we – the normal people – are. So with all due respect, dear media professionals, I will from now on address You, merely as ‘you’.

Because that is what you are: not gods, but human beings. So are the people behind the stories you tell, and so are the people behind the TV-screens. Human. But you fail us. Every time you levitate to higher grounds of morality, and think in rights and wrongs when censoring your content, you reduce us to be less than what you are. Then you grab a pair of scales, a sword, claim to blindfold yourselves and play Justitia.

The goddess Justitia is the nodal point of most Western systems of law and order. She is blindfolded, and thus impartial and objective. She weighs the arguments presented to her on a scale, and finally exercises justice with her sword. In the same way, you – the media professionals – weigh the footage of the horrors of war, and cut that which is not suitable for the audience.

Only problem is: no news editor is blind. Neither are journalists, nor cameramen. So the justification of your God-like self-perception, the impartiality and objectivity, is transformed to something completely different: morality.

And morality is – unlike objectivity – subject to an underlying framework of ethics. It is a system of thought and behaviour, which holds no oath to reality, but to the distinction between right and wrong. And I do not remember delegating my personal moral standards to be administered by any commercial news corporations.

You may say: “But what about universal humanistic values like empathy? Is it not in the common good for the normal people that journalists adhere to some set of moral values, when they take a glance at the scales, before deciding where to place the edge of the sword?” My proposed answer is “no”.

The reason for this, and the reason for my initial load of sceptic and sarcastic complaints, is to be found in the

POLIS Summer School classroom last Friday. Our lecturer presented a quote from a news editor, who argued that the media should not show too violent pictures of sufferings in wars, as this would repel the audience, and impede its feeling of empathy towards the sufferers. Pardon my ignorance, but who defined empathy to be the universal goal of journalism?

I am a Danish citizen, and my tax money has financed wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. What if I do not want the media to draw me towards an empathetic concern for the sufferers? What if I want the media to show me the reality of war, as portrayed by the soldiers on the battlefield? What if I want to be disgusted by the images of molested bodies, mass graves, blood, wounds from phosphor-attacks and torture?

If so, I must trust the compartmentalised Internet to show the reality of the wars I pay for upon me. But if that does not happen? If I am too busy trying to find the latest X-Factor humiliations on Youtube to search for alternative news reports and footage? What if I forget to actively question the reality of the activities I sponsor around the world?

Then I am left with commercial media's 9 o'clock news coverage, trying to evoke *empathy* – and therefore making the cut over footage, whenever the reality it portrays is not suited for the loyal viewers. But I have the right to know. And if knowing means to be repelled, then repel me. But do not filter the images. I do not want any commercial media source to decide whether its portrayal of the bombings of a school should leave me empathetic for the victims, or disgusted by the horrors of the war I finance.

The commercial media would probably argue: "But if we repel the viewers, they turn off the TV, and then they see even less." And I would reply: "So do you censure to inform, or to maintain your ratings?" Being a student of business economics, I am not ignorant to the necessity of ratings for commercial media to exist. And likewise, I am not ignorant of the maelstrom of double standards and hypocrisy which defines the field and self-perception of the modern media-professionals.

You tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth (like in court), commit to impartiality and objectivity (like Justitia), and are ruled and reasoned by morality (like normal people) in your quest for the generation of empathy when reporting on human suffering. All this as a humble service to your adverti- ahem, sorry... I mean: to your well-informed viewers.

This letter is not as much a critique of the media professionals, as of the system. A system where that alleged fourth power of the state, intended to be the people's watchdog, has been privatised, and thrown into a fight for people's attention. I am no critic of private ownership, but I am a critic of lies. And instead of trying to cover up the nature of modern commercial journalism, I would rather have you all admit the truth. I will thus finish as I started, by suggesting a disclaimer to be read, every time you present a news report. This disclaimer should not warn against disturbing pictures, but your subjective and sheltering portrayals. Please repeat after me:

"We, the media-professionals are not impartial. We are not objective. No God has provided us with super-human abilities to distinguish universal rights from wrongs. We frame our reports, so as to obey our own integrity – and that of our news editor – not yours. We produce news that sell. If our news does not sell, we loose our jobs. Do not assume us to provide you with any other truths than that of our own. Our news are constructed by human beings, and subject to some degree of censorship. Please do not assume to know what is going on 'out there', just from watching our show. We strongly encourage you to check for yourselves, but advise caution, as what you will see then, *will* be disturbing."

Emil Stigsgaard Fuglsang

LSE-POLIS Summer School

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