6
Mass Media and Digital Culture

6.1. TV news, empathy, and terrorism

Every day, every hour, every minute television and other mass media confront us with images of suffering and dying people all over the world. We see people suffering from natural disasters, war, famine, political murder and torture, terrorism, and so on. What are the implications of this for moral judgment? Since it understands moral judgment in terms of spectatorship, moral sentiment theory appears to be particularly suitable to answer this question. However, this approach also has significant limitations. In this section, I discuss morally relevant advantages and disadvantages of a moral sentiment approach to global suffering mediated by television. I will focus in particular on terrorism. In the next section, I will ask the question if and how violent videogames can stimulate empathy. My discussion will benefit from the insights gained in the previous chapters.

6.1.1. Good news: television and empathy

The main advantage of the tele-vision of terrorism and other human suffering around the world from a moral sentiment perspective is that it allows for the exercise of empathy on the part of the spectators. Such exercise would be far less common if there were no global mass media. Television and newspaper images expand our field of vision and therefore the field of potential suffering people and situations we can project ourselves in. The moral gain seems manifold. First, the mass media provide us with plenty of opportunities to train our capacity for empathy. We become better in it. Secondly, following Nussbaum we can say that people come to understand and appreciate the differences and similarities between themselves and people they get to know by means
of the mass media. The mass media expand our moral world. All human beings become part of our moral community. Thirdly, the exercise of empathy can lead to right moral judgment and action. Empathy can motivate us to call (some) suffering unjust and do something about it in one way or other. This means that we get to know the lives and fears of people living in distant countries, we come to understand how their situation differs from ours, we realise that they are humans like us, and on the basis of the latter insight we may engage in universalist moral reasoning in the sense that we do not tolerate a kind of suffering elsewhere which we regard as morally unacceptable in our own environment or country. (I will return to this point in Chapter 9.) Empathy, it seems, makes the world a better place. But is this necessarily so?

6.1.2. Limitations: empathy and terrorism

There are good reasons to doubt the moral blessings of empathy, of the mass media that show suffering, and of the moral sentiment approach to moral judgment.

First, rather than training empathy, the mass media can make us apathetic rather than let us train empathy. We see so much suffering, including terrorist acts, the habit of apathy rather than empathy can be the result. Always to exercise empathy with the same intensity seems psychologically impossible. As with all exercises bodily and mentally, there is a limit to what we can do empathically. When we get used to always seeing suffering and become tired of always trying to imagine how it is to suffer for others, we stop doing it. (See also Kingsolver’s remark about numbness mentioned in the next section.) If this is the case, the terrorist fails, since the result of the actions is not terror. More precisely the result is only local terror, but not global terror – which is the aim of those terrorists with a global agenda.

Secondly, if we do not become apathetic, the opposite reaction is equally possible. Over-stimulation of our moral sensitivity can make us panic to such an extent that an adequate moral judgment becomes impossible. Sentiments can be morally dangerous. Some people are no longer be able to judge or to arrive at an appropriate judgment. Some people may join a terrorist group because of sympathy with terrorism, some may support an extreme-right political party or support state terrorism out of fear. Fundamentalists (which are to be found among terrorists as well as anti-terrorists) gain by this reaction, since polarisation and radicalisation are the result. They divide the world in camps: ‘if you’re not with us you’re against us’, there are ‘good’ people and nations and there are ‘evil’ people and nations. Installing fear and anger in the hearts of people